

PREFERENCES AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION¹

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I. Some problems on preferences.

This paper, oriented from the discipline of cultural economics, tries to explain some questions about preferences and cultural consumption. What cultural economics can do best for economic science is certainly to improve the question about how preferences are shaped. In the realm of cultural goods and services (to enjoy a painting, to listen to a piece of music or to attend a theatre performance) training of tastes is a relevant topic and contradicts the supposed stability of tastes. As Marshall already wrote "It is that we do not suppose time to be allowed for any alteration in the character of tastes of the man himself. It is therefore no exception to the law that the more good music a man hears, the stronger is his taste for it likely to become" ²

The trial that this affirmation supposed for conventional economics remains partially solved with the contribution of Stigler and Becker (1977) "Gustibus non est Disputandum". Through their formulation it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that changes in goods consumption are not explained by tastes variations but to the reduction of the shadow price of artistic consumption. This reduction is mainly caused by previous expositions, due to the fact that marginal utility of the used time increases with these expositions, yet considering that tastes remain stable. Anyway as Throsby wrote (1994) "it is clear that the endogeneization of tastes in economics models is likely to be essential if any progress is to be made in explaining demand for the arts", and in general endogeneization of tastes is one of the most common claims by the non conventional streams in economics (Barceló, A.1998). Perhaps the question about how preferences are determined is the most important challenge that Cultural Economics throw over general economics. Common sense brings us to accept that people "act in part upon the basis of myths, dogmas, ideologies and 'half baked' theories" (Denzau, North, 1994) and this argument is especially significant for cultural consumption and moreover for high culture consumption. The high culture, which is theatre, classical music, opera and literature, has a background of reputation that affects not only at a social level but also at individual level shaping and modifying our preferences and demands. On the contrary some forms of leisure or entertainment have a very bad image and then we get obliged to hide our "real" tastes and change our demand in a more "politically correct" way.

In the next point we use some evidence to show some clues of the hypothesis thrown before. In point number three we try to construct a tentative explanation to

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² Cited in Villani, 1992

isolate the ideological effects over preferences decomposing the demand function between the “real” demand and the “ideological” demand. The first one depends on tastes and prices and the second one on mental models. In point number four we go (questioning) over the background of the goodness of cultural consumption idea and in the final remarks we underline some of the significative implications that this approach could bring up.

II. Circumstantial Facts

Though the empirical aspects of the issue would require a specific study with greater depth, we can use the following data, as approximation, to have some empirical support. The following data panel shows the answers of the interviewees on how they spend their free time, compared to their ideal use option.

Real and ideal free time activities

% N = 2.985	what tends to take up, as a rule, your free time?	If it depended on you... how would you like to use your free time ?	Real / Ideal
	76	41	1,9
Be with the family	40	36	1,1
Go to the countryside	54	35	1,5
Be with friends	32	34	0,9
To do sport	27	29	0,9
Go to the cinema	69	25	2,8
Watch television	45	24	1,9
Read books, magazines	42	22	1,9
Listen to music	8	18	0,4
Go to the theatre	17	17	1,0
Go dancing	33	17	1,9
To watch sport	42	17	2,5
To listen to the radio	18	16	1,1
To perform handcrafts	16	13	1,2
Not to do anything special	18	12	1,5
To date a girl/boy	4	10	0,4
To play a musical instrument	10	9	1,1
To go to some association or club	10	9	1,1
Gardening	2	2	1,0
To go to political meetings	8	12	0,7
Other			

Source : Estudio CIS-Consejo Superior de Deportes 2.198, noviembre 1995

The question that arises from these dates is; why do people not act according to their ideal preferences? These differences between real time and ideal time spent in leisure activities shows that there must exist some constraints that do not allow people to behave according to their ideal options. Of course in most of these activities there are important constraints that limit the ideal option considerably. For instance we would like to spend our time playing music but for doing that we first need to learn how to play an instrument. Obviously it is an important constraint that could explain the differences between real and ideal preferences. Indeed, the neoclassical approach will bring us to the questions of costs and constraints. If we do not go more to the theatre as much as we would like it is because the cost of going to the theatre. Or if we spend more time with the family is because there exists important constraints that compel us to do so (to share familiar household, to attend to the education of our children, to guide

their educational or leisure activities). However, this approach could not explain why in activities that imply very similar costs (to go to the theatre and to the cinema) and impose practically the same constraints, notable differences appear between ideal and real use of the leisure time. Neither would it explain how an activity as watching tv, where there are no important constraints that oblige us to watch it, why there are so many differences between the wished consumption and the real consumption ?. It is necessary then, to formulate an approximation that has to do with the area of mental models and beliefs and of how these shape and modify our preferences

III. Decomposed demand. Reputable and embarrassing preferences.

In theoretical terms we could decompose the demand function in two different components; on the one side that part of the demand related to mental models (ideological demand) and on the other side that we could designate as "classic demand" related to a given distribution of tastes, preferences and to the price in a classic way. Though this decomposition will be very little empirically useful it can provide us with some higher resolution in conceptual terms

Thus we would have a total Demand D_t that of a very simple manner could be formulated in the following way:

$$D_t = D_i + D_c$$

Being D_i , the ideological demand, a dependent function of mental models (MM)

$$D_i = f(\text{MM})$$

While the classic demand would depend only on price and tastes.

$$D_c = (\text{Price, Tastes}).$$

Though it is not the objective of the present work to go deeper into the complete implications of this simple formalization, we could consider that in normal conditions and for most of the goods $D_c > D_i$, being in this way that ideological demand only partially softens or modifies the trend that shows classic demand³. In this framework when D_i is negative we are speaking of an embarrassing preference, while when D_i is positive we are facing a reputable preference. The embarrassing preference would make reference, then, to those goods that individuals like and then they express this through the concretion of their market demands, but that they would wish, for ideological reasons that these they would like these goods less. Thus occasionally the consumers dominate the pressure of their classic preferences and succumb to the criteria of their mental models, reflecting finally a demand inferior to which would result in case they did not listen to their ideological "conscience". On the contrary the reputable

³ Though it results relatively easy to find examples where ideological demand will be the principal component of total demand. i.e journeys to Meca for Muslims or Sunday mass for Catholics

preferences are those expressed on goods that do not correspond with our tastes but on those of which our mental models tell us that "we should have to" like more. Real demand of these reputable goods, therefore is superior to the one that would reflect our classic preferences in the moment that we submit ourselves to our duty and we demand these goods that we partially dislike.

If $D_i < 0$ embarrassing preference. $\rightarrow D_c > D_t > \text{Ideal Demand}$
If $D_i > 0$ reputable preference $\rightarrow D_c < D_t < \text{Ideal Demand}$.

This artificial de-construction of demand allows us to isolate, at least conceptually, the effects of the mental models and to categorize those types of consumption in which the mental models, either in a positive or negative way, explain the effective demand. More yet we could think that there exists a relationship between tastes and the mental models in the middle and long term. A given mental conception that compels or prevents us to a given consumption in spite of our tastes, in addition to affect proportionally the total demand in the moment t_0 , it constitutes a habit that really modifies our tastes through a process of learning by doing.

Though the data that appear in the previous point are rather circumstantial related to the topic that concern us, it allows us to classify some cultural or symbolic consumption within the defined (reputable and embarrassing preferences) categories. If we attend to the ratio between real (declared) and ideal demand, we could quickly deduce that watching tv is clearly a embarrassing preference and going to the theatre a reputable one. Other cultural consumptions as going to the cinema seems to adjust quite well the real and the ideal consumption, while listening to music, listening to the radio and reading books and magazines show some more confusing results, since they contradict our initial hypothesis of the fact that the consumption of "high culture" is a reputable consumption. However, the contradiction could be saved if we analyze the nature of the questionnaires. Within the sub-heading "to read", books and magazines appears. And although we can consider that reading books is a component of the high culture, the magazines can be referred also to the yellow press. Also listening to music results confusing since it is not specified what type of music (popular or classical). Anyway, to solve these apparent incongruities it would be necessary to design a specific empirical study. Using, however, the two clearer extremes as watching television (embarrassing preference) and to attend theatre (reputable preference), it would be necessary to corroborate the existence of a socially extended discourse that penalizes the television consumption and reward the theatre consumption. It is evident that in the environment of the social sciences there exists a tele-phobic discourse (Chomsky, Habermas, Noelle-Neuman) whose more recent expressions, (among many others) in the European area are those of Bourdieu (1996) and Sartori(1998). This discourse, in a generic way is supported in the prejudicial effects that at social level (by the spectacularization of the television speech and the distortion of the public opinion) and also at individual level (mental indolence, dominance of what is emotive on what is rational etc.) provokes the television consumption. This discourse at social scientific level is

complemented with another more popular and journalistic one, based on the poor quality of the television products (trash tv), the overabundance of banalities, sex and violence and the ideological manipulation of information (the role of CNN in the Gulf War was the paradigm) contributes to discredit the act of television consumption. So we can consider that people like watching tv more than they declare and that if the discourse of the pernicious effects of watching tv didn't exist then the effective demand over tv consumption would be higher. But in the same framework we are more interested in what is related to the "high culture" consumption.

IV. The idea of the social and individual goodness of cultural consumption

Also the discourse elaborated about massive culture consumption, provided always the need of an individual or social teleology of this consumption. The serious culture is opposed in this sense to the mere entertainment that remains relegated to an inferior position precisely by its unimportance and frivolity. The hedonism of the modern capitalism consumption society stumbles in the frontier of the serious culture and seems to be reserved only for the entertainment demand. From the individual perspective, consume culture for the simple aesthetic pleasure that it provides, seems almost a waste of resources.

Thus a moral hierarchy of the consumption is established, and that is quickly interiorized by economists. Pigou, in its *Economics of Welfare*, already⁴ wrote "*Of different acts of consumption that yield equal satisfaction, one may exercise a debasing, and another an elevating influence. The reflex effect upon the quality of people produced by public museums, or even municipal baths, is very different from the reflex effect of equal satisfaction in a public bar*" The endogeneization of the cultural consumption teleology has instigated that the cultural assets are incorporated in the increasingly number of goods that express our weakness of will. Its consumption responds in a given proportion to the pressure that practices on our acts an ideological conception on the goodness of cultural consumption. As the same Keynes wrote in 1927 about buying books ; *is a...social duty that first of all gratifies those who observe it*⁵. Such as many individuals consider that they *should have* to do more exercise, to smoke less, to eat more healthy, also consider that they should have to consume more cultural assets in spite of the fact that the compensations in strict aesthetic terms will not be totally satisfactory.

At social level, the cultural consumption assumes the distorted function of increasing the spirit of the societies, thus becoming so a magic wide spectrum vaccine for social pathologies. Even the most sharp critiques with respect to the public intervention recognize that the development of the arts is the reflex of a good society and then serve and insure social improvement (Lingle, C., 1992).

⁴ Cited in Moore, T., 1976

⁵ From Spanish translation

This idea, that grant to the cultural goods the preferential label of *merit goods*, it is the one which advocates large part of the governmental interventions in culture.

Although this idea is quite widespread, results enough fallacious. Nobody has clearly proved that a society that consumes cultural goods in high proportion is inoculated against downfall in barbarism, unless the definition of "culture" is accomplished in a tautological way; That is, it will be cultured a society that does not use barbarism to solve their conflicts. But then the cultured qualification will have nothing to do with reading indexes, neither with the number of symphonic orchestras, nor with the art galleries, neither with museums, nor with anything that has to do with the function of a cultural minister. Neither at collective level there exists an evident correlation between higher cultural consumption and greater economic success or social happiness

The idea of social goodness of cultural consumption that was imposed on us by the Enlightenment two hundred years ago, must be put in quarantine, unless someone contributes with more robust arguments. Until that moment, the collective benefit of the cultural consumption is not more than the sum of the aesthetic or social benefits that obtained by the individuals that consume culture and of the benefits derived from the creative and monetary rapture that those individuals that produce it obtain -that it is not little -. No matter how much it hurt us, there do not exist meaningful differences in social life between a social body that contains many individuals disposed to occupy their time watching realities shows, compared to another one in which most of its members know how to hum Mahler's symphonies. In none of the terms that we could consider as collective success, a yellow press indurated readers society is not better than another where people devour serious literature. In either case, the second only will be more erudite, and that only means that it consumes more cultural goods.

The mythology of the beneficial social effects of massive cultural consumption is an idea of the Enlightenment that has been institutionalised world-wide during the XX Century. Since 1951, the UNESCO has been the branch of the United Nations with the goal to encourage the cultural development all over the planet, fulfilling the not demonstrated idea of the fact that when large part of the population consumes cultural goods, most of the conflicts that hinder human beings living together will disappear. From our point of view it is in this groundless optimism where one must seek the origin of the poverty of the social debate about culture, in which anything that is out of the "enlightened consensus" remains immediately drowned in majestic rhetoric

The "right to culture", included in the "Universal Statement of the Human Rights" in 1948, ratifies the idea of the individual goodness of cultural consumption, and has been a key element in the appearance legitimisation of cultural policies. This right, that originally declares: *All the individuals have right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community*, was amplified in the 1970s by Rene Maheu, General Director of the Unesco:

It is not certain that the full significance of this text, proclaiming a new human right, the right to culture, was entirely appreciated at that time. If everyone, as

an essential part of his dignity as a man, has the right to share in the cultural heritage and cultural activities of the community -or rather of the different communities to which men belong (and that of course includes the ultimate community -mankind), it follows that the authorities responsible for these communities have a duty, so far as their resources permit to provide him with the means for such participation [...] Everyone, accordingly, has the right to culture, as he has the right to education and the right to work [this is the basis and first purpose of cultural policy]"⁶

Around the previous arguments a discourse is built that in the western world, in a quite wide way, configures a mental model (MM) that affects positively the cultural consumption, independently of the aesthetic pleasure that provides this consumption and also independently of the signal effects that this consumption can exercise in a given social environment. That is to say that we consider an aspect that is going beyond what suggests Bordieu in his *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. It is not only that the social effects (distinction, prestige) of the assistance to a theatre and the utility that provide us will be one more element to explain the cultural consumption, and then part of our demand is impostured for social prestige reasons, but the dominant discourse around the goodness of cultural consumption "really" modifies our tastes when we impose ourselves several needs; a) it is convenient to cultivate our spirit, b) it is suitable to belong to societies where cultural practices are widely extended c) and consequently we should collaborate directly (through individual demand) or indirectly (through support of the public policies) in the maintaining and financing of these activities.

V. Some implications on the consideration of culture as reputable preference.

These phenomena about reputable preferences are especially relevant, but not only, in cultural consumption and could explain other collateral paradoxes in the field of cultural economics.

- The legitimacy of cultural policies.

For instance, why do the nonusers of cultural services agree in so high proportion with the public subsidies on culture? . Many empirical researches show that the cultural policies are one of the less questioned. There is a wide consensus in Europe that legitimates cultural policies, although they tend to be highly regressive and benefit to a small portion of the high and middle class. The continued intervention of the state in culture and the social acceptance of the expenses in culture could be interpreted as the social institutionalisation of the ideological demand of culture, aspect that would explain why many times, the nonusers of public cultural institutions show their willingness to pay. Many empirical evidence is provided in this sense (Throsby and Withers, 1979;

⁶ cited in Girard & Gentil, 1983, p 182-3

Morisson and West, 1986, Schenider and Pommerehne, 1983). This decomposition of cultural demand that we propose in point two would give coherence to this apparent paradox, since a part of the ideal demand not expressed in the market can remain expressed in preference terms on public policies. One must observe that the citizens, as voters from this double vision of cultural demand, wish and consider important the public intervention in culture, though they will not be cultural consumers (we can consider this argument too for charity, solidarity, ecological behaviour). This idea would overshadow the argument of "optional demand" (Frey and Pommnerhenne 1989) as basis of the legitimacy of the public intervention in culture. What is relevant is not the fact that it there exist theatre offer so that I could attend in the moment that I decide to exercise my demand, but that I consider an individual duty to support the world of the culture, and then I render my ideological demand to the public area even with greater intensity than if I would had been an usual consumer (and then direct beneficiary of the public policies).

- The power of the world of culture

In the second place, from this conception, the strategic cultural institutions and agents behaviour can be understood. The world of art and culture have a high negotiation power in front of the public sphere that other professional or institutional collectives do not have. Public declarations of individual actors, famous musicians, theatre directors, museums curator can easily affect cultural policies because society has always present this lack between effective and ideal demand and cultural agents exploit this social feeling⁷ of guilt. The scarce political and social control of the expenditures in culture in the set of the European countries is a good example of this social complex towards the world of culture. Everything that carry the artistic or cultural adjective collects quickly a wide social and political consensus that avoids more detailed analysis on social economic profitability, opportunity costs of the projects, viable alternatives etc. The information deficiencies of detailed and harmonized statistics at European level can be a good indicative of the inappropriate control that European societies have on cultural activities and on the policies that articulate them.

- Formation and cultural consumption

Also from our interpretation we could reformulate the clear correlation that exists between the formative level and the assistance to cultural acts (Morrison and West 1986). The customary arguments depart from two considerations; the first consists in "that people with certain abilities/aptitudes stay longer in the education system, do better when there, earn higher incomes and tend to have a greater preference for the high art" (O'Hagan, 1996, pp278), and the second part is the addictive character of cultural consumption, so that past consumption explains in an important proportion future demand from the

⁷ For an approximation of this artist's power see Rausell, P (1998)

increase of the utility obtained by each consumed unit. If we consider that the university education, especially in technical careers does not imply necessarily specific training in artistic and cultural aspects, the first consideration could be understood from our approach under the hypothesis that the high educational systems reinforce the endogenization of the idea that the cultural consumption is a healthy habit both socially and individually

VI. Final Remarks

This paper emphasizes the obvious fact that consumption is a complex act in which a multitude of factors intervene. Its own complexity is probably the cause that the economy may have tried to avoid the problem of how preferences are conformed and tastes are fitted in a fictitious stability. The mental models have a decisive importance in most of the consumption and in fact we could qualify globally the consumption as an "ideological act". In this sense the consumer sovereignty is not more than the space bounded with the sum of the restrictions that it is imposed on us by our vision of the world and life. Departing from this obvious assertion we wanted to point out that in some symbolic consumption as watching tv or attending theatre these conceptions or mental models are especially relevant and meaningful in the moment of explaining the behaviour of demand. With a simplified decomposition of demand we have tried to categorise two types of preferences; The reputable and the embarrassing, depending on the mental models that legitimate or discredit them, and we have suggested some possible implications of this decomposition that we suppose can serve to improve the theoretical analysis and the practical implications of cultural consumption and also on the policies that affect them.

From this point of view, and in cultural policy terms, the amplification of the cultural audiences since the World War II may have been based not only on the reduction of the access costs (prices and offer increases) but on the consolidation and extension of that dominant mythical discourse of cultural consumption not only to the educated groups but to wider social groups.

The problem, in our point of view, is that once the goodness of culture was socially accepted, the western societies have proved to be little critical with the concretions of the public action deriving from such a proposition, what has been rendered in a very impoverished social debate and finally in a scarce social control on the cultural decisions. We must not forget that government expenditure in culture has distributive, equity and efficiency effects, and that the direction of these effects has some clear ideological consequences; who lose and who win, and how much we lose or how much we earn in efficiency terms, by the cultural policy. And these are important problems that imply ideological positions and that they cannot be solved through a superficial consensus about fatuous and poor rhetoric. In this sense the economic science can and must be one more tool to contribute to the social discussion on cultural policies. On the contrary to the usual statement, we consider that the culture remains excessively to the margin of politics, this being the space where collective decisions are taken.

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