

## The exposure society

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**Jon Sundbo**

# **The Exposure Society**

**Experience as a new aspect of social status**

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Strategies, Design, and Everyday Life

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*Perhaps it is not that amusing to watch Torsten on TV and read about him in the newspapers every day. If you repeat yourself too much, it becomes dull. There may be people who do not think that what he does is so remarkable. But Torsten does not tell us much about his work, we learn more from the TV and newspapers. One must say that he is fairly competent at dealing with the journalists.*

Torsten Jansson's mother. Torsten Jansson is a Swedish entrepreneur who works in the experience field combining retail and the old arts industry (glass). The quote comes from an interview from his book about himself, by himself, published by himself (2007) and sold in his glass making factory in Kosta, the "glass society" of Småland, Sweden, which has 1 million visitors a year.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Introduction**

This paper presents a theoretical suggestion for an explanation of the growing interest in experience. The explanation is based on a concept of a growing "exposure society" that emphasises experience as an aspect of social status. Experience is not all there is to either the experience economy or contemporary class structure. However, it is an important but neglected aspect of class structure.

The background for this analytical framework is that in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, to some degree in the USA and other countries a discourse about experiences has recently emerged in social science and the humanities and in political and business life. Earlier notions such as culture, leisure and tourism have been received much attention. The con of experience is new as the concept to understand certain development in society. The notion of experience has primarily been associated with business economics principally in the form of the experience economy (cf. Pine and Gilmore 1999) and to some degree in relation to the production of events or performances. However, the notion may also introduce a new perspective for understanding other developments in society. This paper will provide a theoretical discussion of how the concept of experience can contribute to our understanding of social status of which it is now an aspect. The identification of this new notion of status may again explain why there has been an increasing interest in experiences. The increased interest in experience cannot solely be explained from an economic point of view – the exploitation of new market possibilities - it also requires a sociological understanding.

The paper will also argue that the phenomenon of experience is not only about culture understood as art (everything is culture in its ethnographical meaning). It is also about power and position in society, an object of sociology rather than the study of art. The claim is that the focus on experiences is not superficial - a short-term interest for firms to earn money or for the mass-media to increase its public. It is also an expression of a more fundamental sociological phenomenon, namely a new dimension in establishing status and power in society.

The primary aim of this paper is to explain why the users of experiences consume these

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<sup>1</sup> Is Torsten Jansson one of the richest men in Sweden? Not many know exactly. But many know that he is one of the most famous men in Sweden about whom stories are told every week in the press. Probably more people also know the fact that 180 journalists were present when he announced his acquisition of the Kosta-Boda-Orrefors glass factory group, a well-know arts industry than they know the size of his fortune or how many people are employed in his companies.

experiences and how that gives them social status. It will be argued that in general social status and mobility (Blau and Duncan 1967, Crompton 1993) are factors that can explain the increasing interest in experiences. The fundamental sociological explanation of the relation between experience and social status derives from a specific theoretical interpretation of the development of contemporary society which it terms the exposure society. Exposure may be categorised as a sociological phenomenon – to expose one self in public. However, the rationale for this public exposure is to either give oneself a higher social status or show that status. Those with a high ranking in terms of social status (such as world-wide famous musicians or sport stars) become the ideal that people strive to imitate when they wish to achieve high social status.

Therefore the analysis presented here terms contemporary society the “exposure society”. One may claim that not all functions and life in contemporary society are determined by exposure. One should in principle avoid the notion of a “something society” because all theories are limited, one social theory can not explain all social behaviour. However, a tradition of a “something society” has evolved in sociology, probably starting with Daniel Bell’s (1973) notion of a “post-industrial society” rhetorically it helps to get the message across. The analysis here follows this tradition. The use of “exposure society” is merely meant to emphasise an important aspect of contemporary society.

## **2. Experience and its relation to culture**

### **The definition of experience**

The focus on experience started with Pine and Gilmore’s book “The Experience Economy” (1999), which is a book concerned with management and business theory and argues that after having demanded goods and services people will demand experiences. Experience is consumption in Pine and Gilmore’s understanding. However, the concept of experience is older. John Dewey (1934) had already discussed art as experience referring to how people psychologically understand and use art. Gerhard Schulze (1992) in an analysis of the cultural behaviour of different social strata in the German city of Nürnberg termed his analysis “the experience society” (Die erlebnis gesellschaft). However, the emphasis in Pine and Gilmore’s book is not on art or culture and thus we may talk of a new conceptualisation of “experience”.

As stated above, the intention in this paper is to provide a theoretical explanation of why the increasing interest in experience in the market, which Pine and Gilmore observe, is the basis for a new dimension of social stratification. Therefore, taking our point of departure in Pine and Gilmore’s work is fundamental as it emphasises the use of experience as a general social artefact. Gerhard Schulze’s analysis is a contribution to understanding and measuring how the consumption of culture is related to social stratification. While Schulze’s analysis is restricted to the consumption of culture, Pine and Gilmore think of experience as an element in all consumption – of goods, services, culture and other experience products (such as holidays). Schulze’s analysis sees the situation from the users’ side – the citizens, while Pine and Gilmore’s analysis sees it from the providers’ side – the enterprises.

The approach taken here combines Pine and Gilmore’s consumption approach with Schulze’s conceptualisation of social stratification approach. The world of experience will, however, not only include market-based consumption, but also peoples’ leisure activities that are not bought on a market. These could for example be participation in voluntary organisations including humanitarian ones and sporting activities (such as when one runs alone in the forest). The border between formal market consumption, unpaid leisure activities and public experience activities (such as public supported sport and culture activities, town festivals etc.) is porous (Sundbo 2009).

The focal point of this paper is experience as the factor that structures social stratification, not

culture. Experience is considered a general aspect of all consumption and leisure activities. Culture understood as the production and reception of art and similar specialised, high-cultural activities is more restricted. As a consequence of this logic, the culture economy understood as the part of the production system or the formal economy that is the primary producer and deliver of culture – often called the creative economy or creative industries (Caves 2006, Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2001) or cultural economy (du Gay and Pryke 2002, Andersson and Andersson 2006) – can be considered as being included in the experience economy, but it is only part of it.

Since experience is conceived as being different from culture in the sense of high-culture and arts, it may be convenient to define experience. If we look at the literature that has been published until now, we do not find an authorised definition, or indeed almost any definition at all. The attempts to define experience are concentrated on understanding what happens when the recipient – the user – gets an experience. This is in accordance with the approach of this paper, which is to understand why people consume experiences to get social status. Pine and Gilmore do not give an exact definition of experience. They look at it from the provider's side and talk about "staging the production". The closest they come to defining experiences is the following: "An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable (Pine and Gilmore 1999, p. 98). An experience is therefore a memorable event generated intentionally by a company. It is something a person would want to remember and perhaps tell about to others. Later Pine and Gilmore have made it clear that the experience should be authentic (Pine and Gilmore 2007), which means that you can not give people an experience via artificial means such as commercials. However, people, may accept artificial stories as experience if the story is presented as artificial, not as a fake (that is why people for example accept the Disney system cf. cf. Bryman 2004).

The attempts to define experience are focus on feelings. Two Danish analyses (Bache and Horn 2007, Lund et al. 2005) thus use the notion feelings to characterise their analyses of experiences. Jensen (1999) talks about a "dream society" indicating that experience is a kind of escapism. This is a restriction that not characterise other attempts (including Pine and Gilmore's) to define experience. Others have emphasised Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) concept of flow as the basis for defining an experience. However, the concept of flow means that the recipient makes an active effort to get the experience. This does not need to be the case; a person can get an experience passively, for example by watching TV. Others (e.g. Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007) have presented a physical, neurophysiological explanation. This may be correct, but it can not be used in this paper as the basis for discussing experience as an aspect of social status. That would lead to a physiological-functionalist type of explanation that, historically, has been proved to be very problematic.

Here "experience" will be defined as a mental journey which leaves something immaterial – a memory or a sensation. Such an experience can be entertaining, but does not need to be so. It can be educational, but does not need to be so. Experience is started by external stimuli – events, actions or interactions, but is happening in the mind of the individual. The psychic process is also influenced by the mindset of the individual, based on the individual's general outlook on external stimuli, earlier experiences and the actual mood. Experience is relative. It varies in intensity and from person to person. It if varies from time to time for the single person. Not all external stimuli lead to experience. There must be something special to the individual in the situation. Many trivial events such as taking the daily train to work or shopping for the daily dinner are not experiences. They are not remarkable and they will not be remembered. We can not theoretically state the limits between experience and non-experience situations; that demands empirical research. Some events, actions or interactions provokes experiences within the individual because they in the situation or later are

perceived as remarkable. They may be remembered as positive – Csikszentmihalyi (2002) talks about experience as an attempt to get happiness. However, it may also be sad or dramatic events that provoke an experience; the individual can feel himself enriched by them, it may have provided a better comprehension of the “meaning of life” or he may have learned something. There is always an element of enjoyment in experience as Csikszentmihalyi says. This element can also be the enjoyment of better understanding of a serious part of life; enjoyment is not equal to amusement, but experiences can be amusing.

### **Exposure and experience**

What do experience and exposure have to do with each other? As may have become clear, celebrity and exposure appeal to behaviour related to leisure, feelings, meaning, variation in life and so forth. The events that provide these elements are called experiences. Experience as I have defined it is something that happens to the users – citizens. It is something wanted by people. Because it is wanted, all aspects surrounding the creation, delivery and use of experiences get a particular aura. In Lash’s (1990) analysis of art and culture in the post-modern society, aura is something that is built around the unique creative individual - the classic artist – what I here have called a “star”. To Lash and other authors, this aura disappears in the industrialised and mass produced culture of post-modern society. However, we can argue against this view as people in post-modern society are still looking for aura. Instead of aura being limited to elitist, artistic individuals, it is something that many people have a possibility of achieving. Aura is in my interpretation exposure value or celebrity. People are seeking celebrity to get a high status. They can either, in rare cases, achieve “star” status, or at least stand in the shadow of such an aura, for example to become locally famous as an amateur or having the national “15 minutes of fame” by participating in a TV show. They do all this to get an inner feeling of experience, but also to show this experience to other people to underline their social status. Experience both has the function of getting the inner feeling and the external demonstration of status position. One can have one of them without the other, but often the seeking for experience fulfils both functions. Experience both has “use value” and “sign value” (cf. Lash 1990 p. 43). Not all experience behaviour demonstrates status, but much has and the striving to use experience to demonstrate status position is a major explanation for both the experience economy and the exposure society. Exposure is behaviour with a triple function: First it gives people the inner feeling. Second it gives them a possibility of getting a higher social position because of the higher prestige of the consumption of the concrete experience or because they can be the performers of these experiences. Third, it gives them a possibility of demonstrating their performance or use of these experiences to others in society and thereby consolidating their status.

This takes us back to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinction because there is an element of distinction in experience behaviour. Culture consumption may be omnivorous (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007) and people have a much greater chance of social mobility in the experience-based post-modern status system than in the industrial class system, but there are still some experiences that get higher prestige than others. There are several exposure status dimensions. You can demonstrate high status by going to the opera or having holidays in luxury hotels with gastronomic restaurants. You may even exposure yourself on the basis of such experiences, for example by being interviewed in a weekly magazine about your luxury holiday. But you may also become famous and recognized by undertaking a very popular kind of experience activity such as playing in a pop group. You do not become famous or acquire high status by liking pop music, but if you are a worldwide well-known pop musician, you obtain high status, even in the eyes of the rich, powerful opera interested luxury holiday spending people. The absurdity of the exposure society is that behaviour such as injury to property and drug abuse that normally is negatively sanctioned and leads to low status can be considered positive and lead to high status if it is carried out by highly

exposed rock musicians.

Experience in post-modern society is connected to commodification and industrialisation. That is why we are talking about the experience economy. This means that experiences are mass produced and sold on a market. We talk about experience consumption. This again is a prerequisite for the widespread status system based on experience behaviour and exposure. Everybody must have the possibility to get experiences and everybody should have a possibility of becoming experience performers. If experience and the performing of experiences were reserved for a small elite, the status system would not be as general as I claim it is. It would then be used by this elite to demonstrate their distinct position that is out of the reach of ordinary people. This was the system under feudalism where culture was unique and creative, but intrinsically bound to princes and noblemen.

### **Critical approaches to experience**

The tendency to consume more experiences has been subject to several criticisms. The consumption of experience has been characterised as an expression of hedonism (e.g. Rasmussen 2007), this classifies it as less serious and an expression of entertainment and thus an experience economy or society neglects the more serious sides of life. Adorno (1975) argues the art has a critical function in society and its commercialisation such as that which can be found in the experience economy leads to the erosion of this function. While it is true that experience is commodified as it is sold on the market, this does not mean that experiences are always “light entertainment” or an expression of an external and enjoyable relation to life – hedonism. Experience can be both entertainment and the expression of hedonism and it can be more serious, for example part of learning and the existential search for the meaning of life. Even Pine and Gilmore (1999) talk about four types of experiences: Entertainment, Aesthetic, Educational and Escapism. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) talks about “flow” as an active investment of resources in reaching a result, for example climbing a mountain or understanding modern poems.

The hedonistic critique thus may be seen as an expression of a fundamentally Northern European perspective on life, the Protestant ethic as theorised by Max Weber (1985). The essence of the Protestant ethic is that you should work and not enjoy life. The point of the growth of the experience economy and the evolving exposure society is that people, even in Northern Europe, have reached the point where they want to enjoy the fruits of two centuries of the Protestant ethic. We have accumulated capital for two centuries, now we want to spend it. The increase in experience consumption comes from a surplus of time and money that our society has produced via the two centuries of serious, non-hedonistic, self-sacrificing work. People also want work to include experience. The experience aspect of work is growing in relation to the functional aspect (e.g. the function of producing physical goods which, among others, Karl Marx (1977) emphasised). People also want to be detached from work-based stress even if it should be via escapism such as watching soap operas on TV or going on relaxing holidays. The feeling of stress is no longer accepted, and employers or others should replace it by a more enjoyable or meaningful feeling. The phenomenon of stress is exposed in society; the press writes a lot about stress and it is becoming natural for employers to have stress-reduction as part of the personnel policy. The economy of the contemporary society allows people to use much time and energy on leisure and the social and psychological content of life and people seem to have grasped that possibility. Also the tendency towards porous borders between work and leisure in contemporary flexible work leads to a pressure for more experience in working life.

Even art does not need to be serious, sacred and only related to the dark sides of life as Adorno's position may suggest. The consumption of experience can be enjoyable and make life easier and more interesting as well as educational and existential (such as showing us the meaning of life).

Experience and the exposure society are, however, not only related to the enjoyable sides of life, whether entertaining or educational. Exposure is also used by “the evil forces” by people who want power, revolution and have particular ideological regimes. The wave of Muslim terror that the Al Qaeda attack of 11 September 2001 started is much more based on the exposure of the attacks in the world press, the Internet and other global exposure media than on military force. Local riots (e.g. by a group of young people of a certain ideology in Copenhagen, who lost their “youth house” in 2007) are often based on exposure that can give them more power than their physical or formal political resources could give. This is because people become scared as a result of their experience of hearing about them rather than the actual possibility of being directly affected by them. The politicians, who also live in the exposure society, become afraid about their position or see possibilities for profiling themselves and react to these negative experiences. War, criminality and the execution of power thus increasingly also become oriented towards the exposure society.

The industrialisation and commodification of culture have been, at least implicitly, criticised by sociologists and intellectuals from the humanities<sup>2</sup>. They erode, the argument goes, the social-critical messages of art, they make everything entertaining thus the existentialistic meaning of life disappears in the experience, independent artists can not exist because they need to sell themselves to capital and so forth. There may be some truth in some of the criticisms while others are exaggerated. However, the development towards the exposure society and the experience economy – as all social phenomena – is not just negative. Commodification and industrialisation have also made experience more democratic, at least in the sense that more people get access to experiences and get better opportunities for social mobility. Industrialisation understood as the mass production of standard goods has provided experiences to more people in exactly the same way as the manufacturing industrial system did to people’s material needs.

Industrialisation and commodification are not all there is to the exposure society. Free experience systems evolve, for example the Internet where everybody can create a personal web site (blogging for example). The Internet is not completely free because users have to pay the telephone company for the line, but it is cheap. TV and radio have much of the same characteristics although they are not interactive. Further, the commodified experiences are varied and can be individualised, even though this may only be in form of modulisation<sup>3</sup>. Even critical artists have got more independence and better possibilities for living from their art than in feudalism.

As a consequence of the individuals’ increased focus on experience, a market for experiences has evolved. This market is not restricted to the arts, culture or “creative” industries that some have defined (e.g. Caves 2000). Even traditional manufacturing and service firms increasingly add experience to their traditional goods and services. The borders between these sectors are withering away. Of course firms on the market attempt to sell more experiences and thus push the development of the experience economy further. Politicians (almost independent of their affiliation) emphasise the development of the experience economy because it is a precondition for economic growth and the creation of jobs. The public sector, which has always provided experiences (arts, culture as well as entertainment), is still a factor in the experience economy. The consumption of experience is characterised by the fact that the experiences are delivered by firms, the public sector, voluntary associations and people themselves in a mix that might not be called a market, or at least a very untraditional market (cf. Sundbo 2009). People are often, although not always, active participants in creating and delivering experiences. This modifies the industrialisation and

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<sup>2</sup> Lash’s (1990) analysis may be interpreted as containing such an implicit critique, and Adorno (1975) is a clear expression of such a critique.

<sup>3</sup> Modulisation is the combination of standardised industrial elements thus commodities and services could be designed individually to fit the individual customer and still be produced industrially, i.e. in a rational and cheap production system, (Sundbo 1994)



commodification of experiences.

### **The production of experiences**

Experiences are produced in the culture sector as well as in other sectors, for example the agricultural, manufacturing and service sectors, the public as well as the market-oriented private sector and the leisure sector where people neither buy anything, nor get any services from the public sector. Experience can either be produced and delivered in a face-to-face situation (which at Roskilde University has been termed performance) or over a long distance via an IT-media (such as the Internet, mobile phone network or old-fashioned radio and TV) (Sundbo and Hagedorn 2008). The first situation calls on personal performance competencies as they have been practised in the theatre world for millennia. The latter also requires information technology and technological competencies. The breaking through of the exposure society is – besides the economic and social factors already mentioned – also based on the break through of modern information and communication technologies. The value of exposure would not be as great if one's position in the experience consumption (either as a provider or reliever of experiences) was not rapidly communicated worldwide.

Thus, experience production requires the development of new production methods and systems. The old arts can provide some elements, the disciplines of communication and advertising others, the IT-disciplines again others, but these elements need to be mixed in new ways. The experience elements should be combined with elements from traditional production and activities such as manufacturing, service management and leisure activities (cf. Sundbo and Darmer 2008). New disciplines of experience design, engineering, construction, innovation or whatever they could be called are developing (e.g. Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007, Sundbo and Darmer 2008). In contrast to traditional art, which is based on an inside-out approach (i.e. the artist has some ideas that he or she wants the audience to relate to), the experience design/engineering/construction will be more outside-in. By this I mean that firms and institutions that want to develop experience products or elements will focus more on how people live and how they can use the experiences in their life and let that be the basis for the development of new experiences. The experience innovation process will be more strategic or back-staged (to use Pine and Gilmore's theatre metaphor) (Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2007). Anthropological and sociological studies of people's leisure habits and norms, and probably increasingly their job norms and attitudes and even their political life will be important (e.g. O'Dell and Billing 2005). Experiences will be more important and emphasised in the exposure society and the experience economy will grow – not only the core culture economy, but also as elements in goods and market-based and public services.

Even though the axiom of art as the “heavy, serious and critical side of life” is refuted, one might consider the role of arts and high-culture in this development. Is the commodification and social stratification based on consumption eroding the possibilities of executing advanced and critical art? Is art losing its function in society? This is not the case. People are still interested in art, even critical art, maybe more than ever. At least they probably have more time, and definitely more money to experience art. The possibilities for artists to live by their art (and even become rich) under market conditions have never been greater. People are in their experience consumption also seeking the deeper meaning of life, which makes them open to artistic messages. Further, art is needed for the development of experiences, even in manufacturing and services. Perhaps art is not directly added to goods and services, but to be innovative and develop new goods and services that include experience, the manufacturing and service firms need input. This input may come from art. One may suggest that art is given the same function in the exposure society as basic research had in the industrial society. It is not directly used in construction of commodities, but is a basic knowledge (or in this case, creative) resource that can be transmitted into production-useful

elements. Like basic research, art is a necessary aspect of society's production system, but few firms will, based on a rational cost-benefit calculation, invest in either basic research, or basic art. Therefore, society will have to ensure that function. Basic research has been carried out by establishing universities. We do not yet know how "basic art" will be organised in the exposure society. Until now, it has been organised as direct public economic support to individual artists plus particular educational institutions such as academies of art and music. As the awareness of the exposure society increases, this may lead to other ways of organising the societal support for basic art.

### **3. The explanation of the increased focus on experience: Social stratification**

Besides the more historical explanation of the increased focus on experience presented above, another explanation is that experience, the production and consumption of experiences have become a central factor in achieving social status. The enjoyment of life has to a large degree replaced hard work as contribution to production and therefore to society's system of power. Peoples' behaviour in experience consumption and production therefore becomes a factor that stratifies peoples' social position in the eyes of the other members of the society. Well-known actors in producing experiences or the basis for experiences, for example actors, football players and winners of worldwide computer game contests become "stars" and ideals for social mobility. In this section I will argue for this view in greater detail. I will start by briefly relating this analysis to sociological discussions about class and status.

#### **Contemporary class and status theory**

Class and status are old core concepts of sociology and there is a long literature discussing these phenomena (e.g. Milner 1999, Hess 2001) the concepts are embedded in broader sociological theories. All represent the different attempts to explain social stratification (e.g. Hess 2001) or differentiation (Svalastoga 1965), which means that people have a different social position in society. Most commonly, individuals' positions have been seen in terms of economic class – typically measured by position in the production system and fortune (e.g. Wright 1985), and a status position where people are classified by their social reputation – typically measured by job, education and formal leadership (e.g. Svalastoga 1965). The first position has in its most extreme version been taken by Marxist theorists who claim that peoples' position in relation to the production function (owner of production means versus seller of one's own labour) is the most fundamental mechanism of stratification (Therborn 1974, Wright 1989). The second position has in its extreme been taken by American sociologists (e.g. Davis and Moore 1945, Eisenstadt 1971), who claimed that the USA is an equal society in the sense that there are no fundamental differences in production functions that can not be overcome by social mobility which is possible for everyone. However, according to status-sociology there are some differences in the reputation of how different groups administer their tasks in society; this creates different status positions. Probably the most basic structuring of the field is still to be found in Max Weber's (1914) distinction between class, status and command<sup>4</sup>. This distinction is reproduced in one of the sociological classics, Bendix and Lipset's "Class, status and power" (1953). Class is a production position and has to do with the economic sphere of society. Status is a reputational position and has to do with the social sphere (social estate). Command is authority and has to do with the political sphere. A person's class position expresses his value to the society's material survival and progress. This position is based on the person's competencies to ensure production. A metaphor taken from ethnology could be that of the leader of the tribe's work team. He assures that food will be produced. A person's

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<sup>4</sup> Weber's third stratification factor was parties. This interpretation of Weber's third stratification factor as command is taken from Scott (1996).

status expresses how much the members of the society like or admire him, or at least recognize that he or she is well-known as a remarkable member of the society in question. This position is based on the mutual recognition of the person among the members of the society. Another metaphor taken from ethnology could be that of the medicine man. He is well-known (but maybe not always loved), however he does not contribute directly to the provision of food nor does he have any formal power. A person's authority or command position expresses his capability to order other members of the tribe to carry out certain acts. This position is based on the person's power to get his will by using physical power. A metaphor from ethnology could be the chief. He can command people to for example marry each other or go to war.

Wright Mills (1963) attempted to find a third theoretical position between the economic-structural based class and the individual-oriented status. He also operated with the three Weberian concepts (although he distinguished between occupation and class). Most of all he emphasized education and knowledge as the basis for defining the new power elite, what he called the new middle class characterised by their high education (1956). Of course this group, which may or not may be a class in the classic sense is important when we talk about culture as a class or prestige factor. Not that the old upper-classes such as the noblemen and the industrial capitalists do not have a cultural taste, but to the new middle cultural taste signals are particularly important because this class in Wright Mills theory has no position in relation to the economic production system. This has later been proved incorrect. Academics have become managers of fortunes and the production apparatus, but not all academics have. Many academics sell their labour force and the academic managers are their bosses. Thus, Wright Mills' concept of a new middle class is not particularly appropriate for explaining cultural consumption and exposure as status factors. The so-called new middle class is too heterogeneous (as Mills also remarks). Schulze (1992) in his analysis of cultural behaviour also found different cultural consumption patterns among people that may be characterised as belonging to the same class. In particular, age divided classes in his analysis, which demonstrates that culture consumption is a dynamic factor that is continuously changing. However, Mills' method of looking at new dividing lines within society can be used in this analysis. We may claim that exposure is such a dividing line making exposure strata different from the knowledge strata that Mills observed in the early 1950-USA.

For the purpose of this paper, social status will be the core concept. Experience and exposure are about social communication and reputation, which fit perfectly with the status notion. Class is a particular position in the production function. Of course artists could be categorised according to their production function and might be called a class. However, the focus of this paper is the users, not the artists. The users may also get experiences from non-artistic activities (e.g. being tourists or practicing sport) although artists play a particular role in the exposure society. Experience is outside authority and power structures although the political system plays a role because much experience production, particularly the high cultural ones, only exists because of public support.

Recently class and stratification analyses have emphasised culture as a class and status variable (Devine, Savage, Scott and Crompton 2005). As production in western societies is becoming even more de-materialised (the production of knowledge, services and experience replace agriculture and manufacturing), cultural symbols and behaviour are increasingly becoming the expression of one's class or status identity. Here culture refers to the experience-oriented part of life (not including the material and production habits and tools that ethnography calls culture). Gerhard Schulze's (1992) analysis of what he called the experience society also demonstrated that different social strata have different patterns of cultural consumption. This theoretical view is inspired by Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction which characterises the particular symbolic expression of one's class membership; individuals express their cultural capital, which is class-specific. This expression confirms the class members in their communality and difference from other classes. The symbols of

distinction are changing from being economic-productive ones (such as expression of wealth via many expensive objects) to becoming cultural ones (such as which music one likes or which activities one carries out on holidays). Bourdieu's culturally based concept of distinction is an expression of what Marx (1955) called class "for itself" ("für sich"). Marx made the distinction of class "an sich" (in itself) and "für sich" (for itself), which expresses respectively the objective economic-productive position of a class and the degree to which the class is conscious about this position. However, class "für sich" is not completely identical with social status because class "für sich" is based on the objective economic-productive position while social status is based on social norms, which may vary independently of objective economic-productive position. Class "for itself" is a manifestation of the class consciousness, exactly as in Bourdieu's distinction.

Other sociologists have emphasised culture as an increasingly important factor compared to the economic production function. Lash and Urry (1994) talk about the economy of signs, the latter being cultural artefacts and behaviour.

If one goes a step further, this also shifts the weight from economic and production-oriented class position towards reputational and leisure-based status position in society. In this context there has been a discussion about post-modernism and stratification: Whether the individualisation that post-modernism is an expression of (e.g. Lyotard 1984, Giddens 1984) means that the signal of cultural behaviour and taste is not at all class-based, but individual. There has been a discussion about omnivorousness and voraciousness (Warde, Martens and Olsen 1999, Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007). Some sociologists claim that cultural consumption is so omnivorous for the individual that it can not be considered as class-determined. However, others have empirically proven that omnivorousness is mostly practiced by the higher classes (Warde, Martens and Olsen 1999, Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007), which makes omnivorousness itself a distinct aspect of class.

### **Social status as an adequate concept**

We must come to a conclusion concerning this discussion about culture's importance as a class variable in a post-modern framework. One possibility is that the discussion concerns social status which can not be seen as a fixed structure that divides the members of society into fixed and permanent groups. Social status is a more fluid variable - more of a scale where people can observe where they are placed, where other people are placed and where they want to be placed. Social status is a dynamic factor where people strive to climb, and sometimes succeed in climbing, up the scale. Social class is a very structure-oriented concept which expresses that a citizen's position is determined by a fundamental structure such as the production system or a basic power structure which can not easily be broken (sometimes only by revolutions) (Milner 1999, Dahrendorf 1959). Social status is a more actor-oriented concept and it is easier for a citizen to change his or her position because it is normative. Social status depends on the assessment of the other members of society and their behaviour, for example their consumption of culture (Scott, Divine, Savage, Scott and Crompton 2005). This assessment can more easily be changed than the fundamental production, economic or power structure. In such cases the assessment is not individual, it is not a matter of taste (a term Bourdieu (1984) uses). It is a social factor based on general social norms. People's assessment of other people, for example in social ranking (Scott 1996, Svalastoga 1965), is based on what they think gives prestige in the opinion of the other members of the society. This distinguishes social status from the idea of cultural taste understood as the inner-directed psychological experience of, for example, a painting. If a citizen expresses an admiration for a painting, is it in relation to status because he thinks that other citizens also admire this painting and he will get prestige and have a good reputation for having chosen this painting. And, of course, he must express his admiration so that other people will know about it.

However, by "taste" Bourdieu (1984) does not mean individual cultural preferences that people

choose from situation to situation. He sees cultural capital and habitus as being socially inherited, and cultural taste is an expression of that. Further, each individual is aware of which social class or group he or she belongs to and his or her taste expresses the cultural norms of that group. That is the idea of distinction. Cultural capital is not as fixed as class. Culture may, even in Bourdieu's view, change while class belonging does not, or at least only very slowly or through revolutions. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital thus is placed somewhere between a class and a concept of status. In that way Bourdieu – as Wright Mills thirty years before – attempts to find a third way in the class-status problem. In this analysis of the exposure society, social status is the obvious concept to start with because exposure as status is about social reputation. I will, at the end of the paper, come back to Wright Mills' and Bourdieu's third position and discuss whether exposure can be the basis for more than actual superficial reputation – a more fundamental factor of social differentiation that can not easily be changed.

As early as 1976, Daniel Bell (1976) emphasised culture as a factor that in the post-industrial society had replaced individuals' position in economic production as the most important factor in terms of stratification. According to Bell, individuals' position in production and their class belong to industrial society while the post-industrial society (cf. Bell 1973) is characterised by culture as the most important differentiating factor. Bell talks about hedonism, thus culture is more about the light, leisure part of life than the heavy fight for survival. He also emphasises the variation of cultural experiences as a differentiating factor (Bell 1976 p. 99)

### **A new basis for social status: Celebrity**

Let us therefore turn to the discussion of the exposure society and how that relates to social status. This will later lead us to explain the growing interest in experiences.

The basis for the idea of the exposure society is that people currently seek fame – to be well-known, recognized as a special member of the society. It signals that I am a member of the society because you know me. Because you know me, I am important and have great prestige. Being a celebrity becomes a status factor in itself. People strive to be well-known to achieve social status. It assures them a place within society and the more well-known they are, the higher position. People have always strived for achieving the highest positions and general celebrity confirms your membership of a society. If that is important, you are “more of a member” the more famous you are. And celebrity has become more important in the contemporary exposure society.

The trend towards celebrity being the core status factor leads to people seeking celebrity. This tendency determines the exposure society in which people increasingly attempt to get greater prestige and social status by exposing themselves in public in order to become a celebrity, or to get closer to being one. This means that people admire celebrities.

You can be ascribed celebrity by others. For example have cultural traditions – and sometimes power – made some persons famous, for example kings, prime ministers and actors. There are social mechanisms in society that distinguish certain individuals. This framing is not decided by the objective position of the individual, for example in the economic production system. It is an individual position. Some actors become famous, others do not. Collective social mechanisms appoint the well-known, but you can influence them yourself. You can do something to make yourself well-known and thereby signal that you have a high social position. You can expose yourself. This can be done in many ways. You can toil to become a well-known actor or politician. You can try to participate in a reality show on TV. You may not be assessed equally high by the other members of the society no matter what you do and your fame will not last equally long. To be prime minister or the biggest star on the national football team gives you a more sustainable reputation than the 15-minutes fame of participating in a TV-reality show, but the latter gives you more reputation than doing nothing. People tend to expose themselves to get a social reputation.

Sometimes this takes on extreme forms as when TV-channels organise talent contests in which children can become pop-stars. However, this is an expression of the exposure imperative that exists in contemporary society.

The ordinary citizens use the “stars” of the exposure society (cf. Sundbo 2009) – the famous actors, sportsmen, politicians, scientist or whoever – when exposing themselves. They do it by imitating the “stars” hoping to become stars. This happens when people participate in reality shows or establish pop bands. They also do it by placing themselves in the shadow of the “stars” hoping that some of the light from the “stars” will fall on them. One mirrors oneself in the “stars”. It gives people prestige to say that they are working with a famous film director or sportsman, even if you do the cleaning work or sell sausages. In the film industry it is normal, at least in Denmark, that young people work for nothing for half or one year just to get the chance to get a permanent technical position in a film company. They find it so fascinating to get into the shadow of the stars.

While celebrity is a position you aim for, exposure is behaviour. Exposure is one means that the individual can use to create celebrity and thus social mobility for herself. It is not the only means, but it is the one that the individual can mobilise herself.

Social status in contemporary societies (at least the developed ones) is composed of four dimensions. The old ones, occupation (position in the economic system, comparing to the classic class position), education (position in the new, third system cf. Wright Mills 1993), and power (cf. Weber 1914) still exist. A new one, celebrity, which is based in the recognition of the individual as a prominent, or at least well-known, member of the society has been added. The celebrity dimension has gained increased importance and the other three dimensions, at least occupation and education, have decreased in importance. This is reflected if one measures social status. Exposure becomes a central phenomenon as individuals attempt to create social mobility for themselves in a society where celebrity is a core status dimension.

Celebrity, or exposure is not a class position and Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinction can not be used to explain the exposure society. Distinction is a more static concept that expresses a more fixed class situation where the cultural norms and values of a social group do not change rapidly; while exposure expresses a more dynamic change where cultural norms are omnivorous (cf. Warde, Martens and Olsen 1999) and can change quickly. Celebrity is similar to, but not the same as Honneth’s (1995) concept of recognition (“*anerkennung*”). Honneth’s concept is mostly related to primary (person-to-person) relations where celebrity is related to secondary (mass) relations. Recognition is a mutual relation and part of a primary interaction and has the character of a right. Recognition is related to honour and particular social values and it is based in the individual’s supposed effort to realise the goals of the society and contribute to its functioning and reproduction. Honneth also relates recognition to prestige. Thus, in many respects Honneth’s concept of recognition is similar to celebrity and exposure, but the latter are more superficial. One can be famous without having contributed to anything productive. Fame may have a function in maintaining societal cohesion because the person that people admire becomes a sign of togetherness because we admire the same person. However, there is no mutuality in it. Celebrity is one-way. It is not based in any rights or recognition of one’s abilities. It is just an expression of the fact that one is well-known. While Honneth’s concept of recognition is based on the “heavier” side of life, ethics, conflict, personal respect and so forth, celebrity and exposure are on the “lighter” side of life, experiences. Experiences may also be serious, an existential search for the meaning of life (cf. Pine and Gilmore 1999), however, in exposure there is more of a demonstration of superiority. “Have you all seen that I have found the meaning of life”. This superiority is within the worlds of art, play and leisure – a surplus situation with resources to have fun and an interesting life besides the fundamental social recognition.

Exposure and celebrity are more about the message of “I am well-known”, particularly via mass

media than the content for what I am well-known (e.g. I have made an effort for ensuring production, solving a social problem or others in society). Of course there must be a content (however light it might be) to send a message, but the message is the most important. This is similar to McLuhan's idea - put forward in 1960s concerning the mass communication society that "The medium is the message" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967): The mass communication means are per se more interesting, and therefore more important to people than real events, the content. This may be an exaggeration and McLuhan has been much criticised. However there is some truth in it and it emphasises the importance of mass media for exposure.

Exposure is also similar to narcissism that has been stated as characterising the post-modern society (Lash 1979). There are elements of narcissism as defined by Lash and other sociologists in exposure, however, the original notion of narcissism has a more inner-directed content. It is the mirroring of oneself in oneself. One likes to see oneself. Exposure entails that others should see oneself.

#### **4. The exposure society**

##### **Empirical evidence for the exposure society**

An empirical indication of the growth of the exposure society and a weakening of the knowledge society is an investigation of social status that has recently been undertaken in Denmark (A4 2006). A representative sample of Danes have assessed the prestige of different occupations. People that have an occupation characterised by exposure and high possibilities of becoming a "star" are placed as high or higher on the prestige scale as occupations with a knowledge basis are. On a scale from 0 to 10, engineers and researchers have the highest score. Next accountants have a score of 6.4, real estate agents 5.6 and high school teachers 5.5. So far does the knowledge society penetrate the status scale. However, exposure occupations are placed high on the scale as well. Actors and football players have a score of 6.5, designers 6.2, journalists and authors 6.1. Even cooks have a score of 5.5, which in the analysis is interpreted as the effect of the many chefs exposed in TV broadcasts. School teachers have a score of 4.6. At the bottom are cleaning assistants (score 2.0) and welfare recipients (score 0.7). The exposure occupations were not assessed that high in a similar analysis in the late 1950s (Svalastoga 1959). This supports the thesis of increasing prestige of exposure occupations and the thesis of the emerging exposure society.

##### **Explanation of exposure and celebrity as social stratification factors**

Celebrity can be explained functionally by the fact that people get their psychological needs for fun, meaning and variation in their lives by achieving a celebrity position. Exposure therefore has the function of fulfilling individual needs, besides it has the social function of creating societal cohesion which is why the exposure society arose. A less functionalistic explanation may be that a historic coincidence of different circumstances for a period leads to a certain behaviour pattern such as the current emphasis on exposure.

Exposure as a central aspect of contemporary post-modern society has been caused by four developments.

One is the weakening of the traditional stratification mechanism attached to class. Occupation and economic production position are no longer reliable as means of social positioning. The post-modern trend of flexible job functions, lifelong learning, inflation in titles and a variety of job types has eroded occupation and economic production positions as an identifiable stratification factors. This factor no longer defines distinct classes and members of the society have difficulties in understanding occupational positions. Besides, one's position in economic production does not mean so much as it did in earlier societies such as the agrarian and the industrial societies. This can

be explained in a functionalist manner as the problems of basic survival having been solved, and thus signs and identification related to the production functions are no longer so highly ranked. Other interests and focuses related to leisure, the public (e.g. exposure in mass media) and cultural signs have taken over. Even knowledge and education are currently weakening as factors of stratification. One may argue that the knowledge society and the knowledge economy that were strongly emphasised in economic and sociological analyses in the 1990s (e.g. OECD 1996, Rodrigues and Lundvall 2002) are weakening. The basis for such an argument is personal observations, measures of occupational rankings in the population (that I will come back to) and the analyses of other factors in the public discussion and economic development (such as for example experience, cf. Jensen 1999, Pine and Gilmore 1999). To get a high education, becoming a knowledge expert and executing dominant strategic and analytical based management in firms and public institutions are no longer sufficient to get reputation and a high position in the opinion of the members of the society. Still, societies need knowledge to solve problems (such as climate problems and pollution, the threat of war, economic growth, social problems). However, one may argue that a certain scepticism towards whether formal analytical knowledge can solve all problems arising in society. The discourse of solving problems is increasingly organised around innovation as the notion of developments that can solve problems and even give the citizens a better and more interesting life (e.g. Barnett 1953, Sundbo 1998, Chesbrough 2006, von Hippel 2005). It is characteristic that the movement in the current innovation discourse is away from analytical knowledge based innovation as it for example is implemented in entrepreneurship research (e.g. Kanter 1983, Sundbo 1998, Swedberg 2000). Entrepreneurship is more about attempts – the will to try even if one do not know if one will be successful. It is more a belief in insistence and personal drive than in rational analytical and planned behaviour. Entrepreneurship has in relation to science and other formal knowledge systems more of an element of experience and fewer elements of knowledge and education. It has been demonstrated that it is difficult to teach entrepreneurship (Sexton and Landström 2000). It must be experienced to learn. These developments weaken education and knowledge as status factors.

The other development that has given exposure a central position is a growing focus on the social or “bright” side of life as I have argued earlier. People become occupied by having an interesting and meaningful life. The Protestant ethic that Weber (1985) talked about has been abandoned. People want fun, meaning and variation in their lives.

One might say that people are seeking happiness (cf. Csikszentmihalyi 2002), however such an expression raises philosophical problems, for example whether that is not what people have always been doing, or what type of happiness they are seeking. Thus, I will leave out such a discussion. However, what may be argued is that for the first time in history, ordinary people have the time and resources to focus on such matters which until recently have been reserved for the upper classes. The free time for leisure and the interest in fun, meaning and variation has developed over a long period and has for a long time been the basis for a class theory (e.g. Veblen 1953). However, the awareness of its theoretical importance in relation to the breakthrough of the experience discourse is new.

The two other developments are those within information and communication technologies and the economic boom both allow people to focus on fun, meaning and variation in life, a fad that emphasises culture, sport and other experiences and “stars” and the personification of all aspects of life including politics, enterprise management and science. By personification I mean that the focus of the citizens and mass media is more on the person and his or her behaviour than on his or her societal function. The latter is for example expressed in the press’ great interest for the private life and travel expenses of politicians and the relatively little interest in the politicians’ management of enormous tax capitals. Personification means that you must give something of your private life to



successfully expose yourself. This can be seen every day on the Internet.

### **Exposure becomes global**

The emerging of the exposure society is indissolubly bound to the evolution of the mass media. The character of mass media has changed, it has become more global. The technological and economic trends make it possible to communicate information from continent to continent very quickly. Events in a small town in a small country can rapidly be exposed to become world events (such as the so-called “Muhammed drawings” published in the Danish town of Århus). New media evolve. The Internet, mobile telephones and other information and communications technology-based communication systems create new arenas for communication and exposure. They are even better than the old mass media, newspapers, TV etc., because individuals can influence them and attempt to create their own exposure. They are not dependent on journalists or editors or other persons in power. The celebrity dimension of social status thus expands the framework. There may still be elements of national class and status systems, but the celebrity dimension becomes international to some degree. Social differentiation both follows a local, a national and an international pattern. The celebrity factor mostly belongs to leisure and leisure norms are easier to diffuse internationally than economic production positions. It has for example been easier to diffuse American TV soap operas globally than high-tech-knowledge-service production systems. Global launching via mass media supports the emphasis on behaviour that expresses exposure-based status. The production position such as occupation that is the basis for class position is not very useful as an indicator of global stratification because people often do not know the concrete positions of jobs in foreign countries.

### **Exposure leads to wealth and power**

It is not only because of celebrity in itself and the social status it gives that people seek it. Celebrity leads to wealth and power. The power dimension of social status still exists and has maybe not been weakened as much as the production position (such as occupation) and education-knowledge as an aspect of status. However, the way to power increasingly goes via celebrity. People listen to what celebrities say, even when these express opinions on matters that are not connected to the basis of their celebrity. People listen to a famous football player’s opinion on social issues or politics. Even scientists express their opinion on matters that are not part of their research just to become famous. In Denmark, the government even graduates the budgets of the universities according to how famous their scientists are, i.e. how many times they are quoted in newspapers (whatever the topic is). Political parties successfully nominate TV-journalists or other celebrities only because they are exposed in the public. These celebrities may, or may not, have particular political competencies. This tendency may be explained by the post-modern tendency: Ideologies and even party programs are weakening as bases for politics. Politicians are increasingly elected based on their personality or how well-known they are. If the crucial factor is to be well-known, it is more efficient to nominate a well-known person than to teach a party-soldier to become well-known.

Celebrity can also lead to wealth. In contemporary society, celebrity and “star” quality are the basis for the highest income. The richest people are rarely industrial capitalists, and definitely not the knowledge elite, it is the most exposed “stars”. Income and wealth are not proportionate to individuals’ professional ability and competencies, but to their degree of exposure. The more you are on TV, the more you sell and the richer you will be. The most exposed actors get the highest fees. The most exposed people also get the offers of the highest extra income, for example to do commercials, to be consultants or to be well-paid board members. Functionally this can be explained by the fact that it is difficult to assess the competencies of experience workers (e.g. a journalist, an actor, a musician) and therefore the companies and institutions have no choice but to rely on the celebrity dimension. This is not bad since firms and increasingly public institutions in

the experience economy live on celebrity. People buy the products from celebrities, not from competent people. The latter is not completely true, but the tendency is that celebrity plays a relatively larger role. As consumers we are not that interested in basic functions anymore since the fundamental problems of survival have been solved. We are more interested in experience and the story of a celebrity (his or her personalisation) is interesting and makes us give a high price for a good service or experience to which this story is connected.

### **The exposure society – a universal societal structure or a fast fad?**

I have stated that the “exposure society” as a concept only characterises one aspect of contemporary society and its development. One may therefore speculate on how deep-rooted this aspect is and how long it will last. Experience will last for ever, but the social set up in which experiences are formed will change. The current trend where experience is framed within the exposure society framework will not last for ever. However, as argued in this paper, this trend is contemporarily fairly deep-rooted since it is the basis for a great part of peoples’ lives and social stratification. It is not just a fad that will disappear in a few years. Nobody can say exactly how long the current exposure society will last. This also depends on other events in the world. An economic boom and a fairly peaceful world will make it last longer. Tremendous events such as severe climate problems, war and terror or a severe global economic recession may change people’s awareness and needs in other directions. These could for example be more religion (more intense emphasis on the meaning of life), voluntary anti-pollution and resource-saving physical effort, a care society where people focus on taking care of other people or in yet another direction. Which direction cannot be predicted.

The exposure society is one aspect of the development of the post-industrial society (as Bell (1973) has termed it) or the postmodern society (as Lyotard (1984) has termed it). These terms characterise the basis of society that will remain permanent for decades, or maybe centuries. Therefore, the analysis of aspects such as exposure and experience is important to understand this society and its development.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested a theoretical argument that explains the increased interest in experiences and the growing experience economy as based on experience has become an aspect of stratification in the exposure society. We do not have a simple deterministic cause-effect explanation. One may neither suggest the increased focus on experience nor the stratification mechanism as the cause and the other factor as the effect. They mutually influence each other and the break through of this mutual determination is based on a particular historic situation with the accumulation of capital and hard working of the Protestant ethic (cf. Weber 1985). The break through is further based in a period characterised by four important preconditions: 1) A weakening of traditional stratification mechanisms such as occupation, education and perhaps power. 2) A change of the “Protestant ethic” labour moral towards more enjoyment in life. 3) Economic growth where people can afford to increased their consumption of commodified experiences. 4) The break-through of the new IT-based communication channels. The latter is a precondition for the exposure society, the first for the increase of experience consumption.

The development leads to consumption of experiences becoming important to people. This again leads to an increased consumption of commodified experiences bought on the market, but also to an increased search for free experiences in people’s free time. Experience becomes a requirement for life in general, for example also in peoples’ working life.

These developments lead to an exposure society where consumption and production of experiences and the experience “stars” or exposure icons such as artists and sports stars become a

social stratifications mechanism. Exposure, and thus the behaviour of experience consumption and production, becomes a means for peoples' attempt to get social status in society. This stratification mechanism again strengthens the focus on experience. The development of the experience economy thus is not just a fast fad.

Experience is not the same as culture. Experiences are consumed on a market, both as culture and as additions to goods and services that we would not traditionally call cultural, at least not in the meaning high-cultur (e.g. video-games, running in the forest or experiential elements in peoples jobs). The experience phenomenon also includes free activities that people carry out in the leisure time such as garden work or sports activities. Culture understood as high-culture (art) is a part of the experience phenomenon and a basis for innovation, the development of new experiences, but it is only a part of the experience phenomenon.

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