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Voluntary hysteresis in food consumption and in the mobilisation of power – When Jay Z and Beyoncé went vegan

Abstract:

Hysteresis, according to Bourdieu, is experienced as a passing crisis of anomie or alienation as one becomes accustomed to a new taste regime. We propose that hysteresis plays an important role in why people adopt challenging taste regimes, like veganism. We then ask, what role does voluntary hysteresis play in food consumption and in the mobilisation of power? We do so by focusing on the case of the so-called 22-day vegan diet, upon which rapper Jay Z and his pop diva Beyoncé embarked in 2013. Our contribution is to show how purposefully seeking out the experience of taste hysteresis through the unpleasant transition to veganism comes to be a point of distinction. This is because the agentic intervention into food habitus and subsequent voluntary hysteresis transforms the distribution of symbolic capital. Furthermore, while Bourdieu argues that hysteresis tends to emphasise the existing power positions within a field as individuals from privileged backgrounds are more equipped to navigate the changing field, our findings suggest that it is particularly the upwardly mobile who seek out voluntary hysteresis. To these consumers, voluntary hysteresis has exclusionary potential which distinguishes them from their earlier, lower social class.

Keywords: hysteresis, veganism, habitus

Introduction

Research has shown how regimes of taste often involve careful evaluation and hedonic appreciation of subtle tastes. This work concerns how consumers “gradually change the quantity and character of recorded descriptors as they open their bodies to novel sensory experiences” (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2016). However, there are also more radical and challenging practices to transforming taste regimes and, yet, very little is known about the social role of experiencing and promoting displeasure in acquiring a new taste regime or about how such transformations can take place abruptly. Veganism, for instance, is an example of a challenging taste regime if one is not accustomed to it. Indeed, in popular media, for instance, the image of veganism has been very extreme and negative (Lundahl 2018).

We propose that this phenomenon of taking up challenging foods regimes can be understood as an instance of hysteresis. Bourdieu argues that hysteresis appears in a misalignment of habitus and field, and is a time lag as the habitus catches up to circumstances (Hardy, 2008). In this sense, hysteresis is experienced as a passing crisis of anomie or alienation as one becomes accustomed to the new circumstances such as the practice of veganism (Hardy, 2008). However, based on extant literature that stresses hedonic experiences, it is not fully clear why individuals would voluntarily put themselves through such hysteresis in their food taste regimes. Likewise, it is not fully clear why people adopt and advertise their vegan lifestyles, which to many also represents a great, and often a distressing, departure from the mainstream diets in Western societies. In this paper, we then ask: *what role does hysteresis play in food consumption and the mobilisation of power?* We explore this question by focusing particularly on the case of the 22-day vegan diet, upon which the rapper and producer Jay Z along with his pop diva wife Beyoncé embarked in 2013. This is an excellent instance of voluntary taste hysteresis in food consumption, since it is predicated wholly upon managing and advertising an unpleasant period of transition. We then propose that the displeasure of taste plays a powerful role for generating distinction in the shift towards veganism. In other words, we claim that consumers also build symbolic capital through a violent intervention into their taste regimes. Additionally, we suggest that these forms of consumption are informed by what we term voluntary hysteresis. Thus, in contrast with extant literature which has considered hysteresis as resulting from an external disruption, such as a technological innovation or social change (Hardy, 2008), we suggest that hysteresis can also be self-initiated.

Our contribution is then to show how purposefully seeking out and signalling the experience of taste hysteresis through the unpleasant transition to veganism comes to be a point of distinction. This is because the agentic intervention into food habitus and subsequent voluntary hysteresis “transforms the distribution of ... symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, while Bourdieu argues that hysteresis tends to emphasise the existing power positions within a field as individuals from privileged backgrounds are more equipped to navigate the changing field (Hardy, 2008), our findings suggest that it is particularly the upwardly mobile who seek out voluntary hysteresis. To these consumers, voluntary hysteresis has exclusionary potential which distinguishes them from their earlier, lower social class.

Literature review

Extant literature has already shown that a taste-laden issue like veganism is framed by enabling and constraining vectors that reflect the tension between agency and structure (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). However, very little is known about the social role of experiencing and promoting displeasure in acquiring a new taste regime. As in Maciel and Wallendorph (2016), the emphasis for regimes of taste has very much been on hedonic evaluation and appreciation of subtle tastes and the role of how consumers “gradually change the quantity and character of recorded descriptors as they open their bodies to novel sensory experiences”. However, we propose that the displeasure of taste plays an equally, if not more, powerful role for generating

distinction in the shift towards veganism. In other words, we claim that consumers also build symbolic capital through a violent intervention into their taste regimes. We suggest that these forms of consumption are informed by what we term voluntary hysteresis.

Traditionally, hysteresis has been seen to result from an external disruption, such as a major technological innovation, legislative or social change, which causes a discrepancy between people's existing habitus, and the new, changing structures or fields within which they live (Hardy, 2008). Hysteresis thus appears in a misalignment of habitus of taste and field, and is a time lag as the habitus catches up to circumstances (Hardy, 2008). In this sense hysteresis is experienced as a passing crisis of anomie or alienation as one becomes accustomed to the new practices (Hardy, 2008). However, in contrast with extant literature, we argue that a turn to veganism can be articulated as a voluntary, internal disruption.

In addition, Bourdieu highlights the fact that hysteresis tends to emphasise the existing power positions within a field. The reason for this is that an individual's early experiences contribute disproportionately to the construction of the dispositions of taste and practices that constitute habitus. Therefore, it is likely that the individuals from privileged backgrounds will be more equipped to recognise the desirability of new field positions and thus attempt to occupy them early (Hardy, 2008). Hence, as hysteresis provides opportunities for the already successful to succeed further (Hardy, 2008), this provides a rationale for seeking out hysteresis. Hence, in this paper, we ask: what role does hysteresis or temporary crisis play in food consumption and the mobilisation of power?

Methodology

This research is informed by a critical epistemology, since we argue that hysteresis is mobilised so as to promote distinction and thus constitutes an aestheticised form of power. We also claim that newspapers are particularly important form of data to document phenomenon as Bourdieu notes how the symbolic imposition of distinction always happens through a “cultural product [such as] a political manifesto [or] a newspaper [and] is constituted taste, a taste which has been raised ...to the full reality of the finished product by a process of objectification” (Bourdieu, 1984: 228). Our case was then mainly investigated through data of daily newspapers in the UK for the period of 2013–2018. We included a large cross section of the British mediascape with four of the largest broadsheets and three of the largest tabloids by circulation. These newspapers were searched using the LexisNexis database using the keywords “vegan”, “vegans” and “veganism” appearing anywhere within the article. These articles then provided us with a better understanding of how veganism was perceived at the time, to provide the context within which the 22 Day Diet was situated. All in all, the data consisted of 2,455 articles. However, it is of course clear that Jay Z and Beyoncé do not represent ordinary consumers. Therefore, we also supplemented the data with 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews of white-collar middle-class Brits to understand how veganism is perceived by consumers.

Findings

22 Day Diet

Distinction happens when the dominant class asserts a symbolic imposition on the field so that not everybody will be able to participate equally. This role is performed by Jay Z's (2013) official blog announcement for the 22 Day Diet, which was regularly quoted by the media. The announcement begins with the anticipation of hysteresis, in other words, anticipation of a painful or unpleasant period of transition: “*Psychologists have said it takes 21 days to make or break a habit. On the 22nd day, you've found the way.*” The post also involves the repeated use of the word “challenge”. It also involves Jay Z begging for help in finding new dining places which would support the new taste regime by saying “*please help out! Please ha.*” This plea

highlights the need for structures which support the new habitus, as the usual “food spots” are not aligned with the new practices.

Similarly, at the heart of identifying this symbolic imposition as an attempt at creating distinction is the description of the 22 Day Diet as a “*spiritual and physical cleanse*”. In discussing distinction and spirituality, Bourdieu himself notes that insensitivity to the pure and spiritual “doubtless represents a particularly unavowable form of materialist coarseness” (Bourdieu, 1984: 10-11). Thus, to attain distinction through spirituality, Jay Z goes on to say: “*Why now? There’s something spiritual to me about it being my 44th birthday and the serendipity behind the number of days in this challenge; 22 (2+2=4) coupled with the fact that the challenge ends on Christmas day.*” Furthermore, the true distinctions of aristocracy are not something that is learnt or acquired, or something that needs justification. Instead, these “dispositions and competences are gifts of nature, as the charismatic relation” (Bourdieu, 1984: 21) to the effort. This is shown by Jay Z’s exclamation “*...It just feels right!*”.

Distinction for the upwardly mobile

The interviewees verified our understanding of “going vegan” as an instance of hysteresis. They clearly indicated that the standard structures do not support veganism and, thus, they argued that if one was to abruptly change their diet and become a vegan, this would show a clear rupture in the established practices. In other words, this is a clear instance of hysteresis. Furthermore, the interviewees felt that what was required to overcome this period of hysteresis is discipline and various resources, particularly epistemic resources: “*[In addition to] discipline, they have to have the resources, having the time and the status and the income to be able to research to go after those choices*” (M36). These epistemic resources which were required for veganism were also then interpreted as a sign that veganism implied a higher social class: “*I would consider them a little bit more in social status ... than the average Joe simply because they have time to devote to researching their choices*” (M36). One also needed, for instance, to have a thorough understanding of one’s nutritional needs in order to make sure that all the needs were met or, even, to place high emphasis on the importance of health and nutrition in the first place.

In fact, the interviewees almost unanimously agreed that veganism would not fit in well with the habitus of the lower social classes. Indeed, a number of the interviewees even argued that lower social classes would find vegan food disgusting. The interviewees then generally agreed that the food of the lower social classes was non-nutritious, fattening and unhealthy – but that they would also be unable and unwilling to change their preferences and practices. Hence, they argued that the habitus of the lower social classes would violently clash with veganism: “*They would probably have a nervous breakdown [if they were asked to go vegan]. Because if you’re accustomed to eating in a certain way, like eating very unhealthy, and then you’re forced to eat really healthy, your body would go into shock, I’m sure of it.*” (F35).

However, the interviewees also did not primarily associate veganism with the traditional upper classes who they associated with indulgence and abundance. Instead, they associated veganism with the upwardly mobile, those who had risen from a humble social background through education and through their career choices. One interviewee (F35), for instance, described her partner, who was now well respected, middle class vegan, as having had a “*very harsh upbringing*” where, he would, for instance, “*go to school without food, he would go all day without food because his family could not afford food*” and that “*he would walk 20 miles to go to school without shoes.*” These experiences had then “*driven him to be a better person in life*” and that veganism was part and parcel of this new lifestyle. This theme of veganism being a source of distinction for the upwardly mobile was repeated by several of the informants. Thus, we argue that, to these consumers, voluntary hysteresis has exclusionary potential which distinguishes them from their earlier, lower social class. More specifically, it

seems that the upwardly mobile become aware of desirable field positions of the perfect and successful neoliberal self which are inscribed into the vegan self. Indeed, as Lundahl (2018) argues, the new trend of health motivated veganism is very much tied to the neoliberal ideology of healthism which links the public objectives of good health and good order with the individuals' desire for health and well-being.

Discussion and conclusions

While the research on food taste often focuses on hedonic or pleasurable consumption and gradual attainment of a taste regime (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2016), we find that experiencing and signalling displeasure with food experiences also plays an important social role. Purposefully seeking out the experience of hysteresis through veganism comes to be a point of 'distinction'. This is because the agentic intervention into food habitus and subsequent voluntary hysteresis "transforms the distribution of ... symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1984). Hysteresis is thus mobilised in a strategic effort to strengthen or maintain cultural capital by engaging with that which is inherently displeasurable. Bourdieu holds that at the heart of distinction there is not a search for subtle hedonic regimes of taste or indeed anything "agreeable". At the core of distinction, Bourdieu (1984) holds, there is the notion that "pure taste is nothing other than disgust, a refusal - a disgust for objects which impose enjoyment."

However, it is of course clear that Jay Z and Beyoncé do not represent ordinary consumers. Indeed, as some of the most influential celebrities in the world, they have a great wealth of resources which set them apart from the ordinary consumers and, more importantly, allow them to recognise and assert the desirability of new field positions before others (Bourdieu, 1996; Hardy, 2008). However, we have also argued that, more generally, it is the upwardly mobile, like Beyoncé and Jay Z themselves, who are drawn to hysteresis. Through education, they become aware of the desirable field positions of the perfect and successful neoliberal self which is inscribed into the vegan identity and which has exclusionary potential. The accruing distinction is then further exaggerated through hysteresis. By such means they distinguish themselves from their earlier, lower social class. In such a way the desirability of the hysteresis is established by the elite, which then also works as a cue for the followers to recognise these new, desirable positions. Indeed, in the UK, for instance, the number of individuals opting for a plant-based diet has risen 350% in 2006–2016 (Lundahl 2018). However, these instances of voluntary hysteresis are also not limited to food consumption. This is, for instance, evinced by the great number of people exposing themselves to great feats of strength such as extreme endurance sports, thus initially putting themselves through a gruelling adjustment period. Hence, the recommendations for future research include extending the analysis also to other contexts.

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