

Culture VS Luxury: The Paradox of Democratization

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Abstract

The starting point of this research is an apparently paradoxical observation:

- on one side cultural policies, in several countries including France, aim at democratization of the access to legitimate culture, with, at most, a modest success; for instance, a heavy public investment has not led to significant increases of the percentage of the population going to theatre or opera, neither has the structure of the audience evolved (education and revenue being the strongest determinants of frequentation);
- on the other side, the rate of diffusion of luxury products has strongly increased and these products are consumed, although with different frequencies, by a larger share of the whole population; this leads several observers to speak of "democratization of luxury".

The first part of this paper will be empirical. We will try to establish the factual basis of the paradox by a systematic comparison of the rates of diffusion and consumption structures of cultural and luxury products or services. This empirical analysis will deal with the case of France, based on survey data.

The second part of the paper will aim to elaborate explanatory schemata for the preceding observations. Several lines of interpretation will be identified including:

- divergences inside the cultural area between legitimate and digital culture, the former being based on an educational model (norms), the latter on the entertainment paradigm (tastes), closer to the modes of diffusion of luxury products;
- evolution of consumer behaviour (fading of the frontiers between high and low culture leading to "omnivore effects"; experiential consumption involving an increased participation of the consumer in a process of "co-creation of value".)

Finally, we will raise some interrogations on the consequences of these observations for the definition of cultural policies.

Keywords

Cultural policies, luxury products, case of France, democratization.