The Movement of Culture and People on the Social Ladder

SJOERD GROENMAN

The University of Utrecht, Holland

The transfer of cultural goods along the social ladder has since long drawn the attention of sociologists. It is quite normal that cultural elements belonging to the habitus of the upper layers of the social hierarchy find their way downwards to other strata. The well-known Dutch historian Huizinga in his study on the Middle Ages gives some striking examples of this shift down the social ladder. I mention only one: "From the pomp of funeral services after the death of a monarch the bourgeois hearse is a cast-off".1 It is easy to enumerate other examples in the field of clothing and furniture. Ross2 is very pertinent in his statement that every class imitates the class just one step higher. He refers to billiard-tables and bath-rooms. Very convincing also is the way down of all sorts of sports. Not only soccer and other games went from town to countryside, they also sunk from the elites to the lower strata.3 H. Naumann4 coined the term "Gesunkenes Kulturgut" (sunk cultural element) and we may say that a list of elements that went down in the history of mankind would be endless: from hats to authority over children, from family-size to television-sets, from beliefs to bedsteads.

In this process of transfer several points may be high-lighted. In principle the same phenomena are manifesting themselves as in the case of the transfer from generation to generation and in that from town to countryside.5 We may ask why the lower strata desire to imitate the higher ones and why some elements are transferred easier than others. Is there only a one way traffic or is it possible that some cultural traits climb from the bottom to the top? Im-

1 J. Huizinga, Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen (Fall-season of the Middle Ages) 5th ed. 1941, p. 65-66. Several other quotations are possible (pp. 56, 59, 70, 371).
3 C. G. M. Miermans, Voetbal in Nederland, (Soccer in the Netherlands), Assen, Neth. 1955.
4 H. Naumann, Deutsche Volkskunde (German folklore), 1921. See also Sj. Groenman, Staphorst, Meppel, Neth. 1947 p. 203.
portant is also the question whether the reception of material goods and of habits is realized in such a way that the harmony in the pattern of culture is not disturbed.

To begin with the last point: the acceptance of cultural goods not seldom requires a change of mind, new attitudes and new behavior. We know that the "nouveau riche", the new rich, is able to buy many things he wants but that it takes time to absorb the style of the upper strata. This is the problem that puzzled Bernard Shaw in his Pygmalion. In the musical "My fair Lady" based on Pygmalion prof. Higgins says: "I'll make a duchess of this draggletailed guttersnipe"... "Take all her clothes off and burn them" and indeed he succeeds to make a lady in speech and manners of the poor flower-girl Eliza. But taken by him to the Ascot races she came out of character beginning to cheer her horse. At that very moment she demonstrates the disharmony in her pattern of culture. The flower-girl suddenly dominates the duchess. It is not enough to be able to pronounce correctly: "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain", although exactly to learn the pronunciation of words as is the practice among higher social circles is very difficult indeed.

The example just given scientifically is not so fair as the lady is. We were dealing with the transfer of cultural goods from the upper to the lower strata. In the example however a young girl out of the lowest layer is raised to the culture of the beau monde. It is not the culture that goes down but the girl that goes up. We might suppose that the effect is just the same. There is a difference however. The place where the assimilation process is going on is not the same and this fact is important for its course and its results. As a rule there are more people climbing than descending in society. Combining this statement with the other one that the transfer of cultural goods downwards is quite normal, the outcome is an exchange of people against cultural goods. The parallel with the exchange between town and countryside is striking: the town delivers goods for the surrounding regions and receives people pulled by its attraction and pushed by the economic and social shortcomings of the rural districts. In this case too it is not indifferent for the elements involved in the assimilation process and for its results where this process takes place. When cultural elements are transferred, the people remaining where they are, in social position or place of residence, in principle the structure of the cultural pattern of the receivers will not change so fast as in the case of people on the move to another social environment. When remaining where they are people are not confronted with a complex of cultural elements they are not acquainted with. They have a hold in the social surroundings of their own, they may be selective in the acceptance of the goods offered to them. They may be eager to imitate in some respects people belonging to a circle considered as higher, but there is no necessity to adjust to the challenge of an entire pattern of culture. Eagerness to imitate does not mean desire to conform. The chance of maladjustment seems smaller. What is happening is the absorption of elements in an existing cultural pattern with the effect may be in the end that this pattern will change radically, but there is no reason to suppose that this process