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The Menu in Society: Mediating Structures of Power and Enchanting Myths of Individual Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

We live in curious times. People's sense of individual autonomy co-exists with structures of power. How do these two phenomena co-exist? An important answer to this lies in the menu. The menu operates as a key form of mediation between people's sense of individual autonomy and larger structures of power, allowing both to co-exist. This article illustrates the operation of the menu in society within consumption, within production, and within citizenship. The article also considers how far the metaphor of the menu in society is compatible with important contemporary attempts to characterize the macro-nature of society. The conclusion articulates how the metaphor of the menu in society can help open up the nature of society to critical investigation.

KEY WORDS

choice / critical sociology / individualism / mediation / power / society

Hors D'oeuvres: The Mediation of the Menu

As a number of writers have convincingly argued, individualism, in terms of people's sense of their own autonomy, is a main current in contemporary society (Bauman, 1988, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). At the same time, contemporary society is also characterized by large structures of

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centralized, and often distant, power – for example, the multi-national corporation. In an increasingly globalized, complex and interdependent world in which such structures of power exist, it is clear that the possibility of true individual autonomy becomes harder to realize. John Donne's aphorism that 'no man is an island' rings truer than ever with global industrialization melting polar ice caps, making it hard even for literal islands to stay above the water. It is useful to characterize people's sense of their individual autonomy as enchanting myths of individual sovereignty. Such visions of the autonomous individual enchant in the sense that George Ritzer uses in *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (1999). The process of enchantment involves the creation of pleasurable dreams and fantasies around an array of time, space, self-image, social relations, and material products. Ritzer argues, contra Weber, that the development of rationalization within capitalism has not meant the death of enchantment – seen by Weber mainly in terms of the decline of religion. Ritzer points out that enchantment lives on as a key social process in the way in which firms systematically seek to enchant consumers. As Jenkins (2000) also argues, processes of enchantment are fundamental to contemporary 'entertainment' (Wolf, 1999), or 'Disneyized' societies (Bryman, 1999). The concept of enchantment is a useful one for it implies active agency on the part of the enchanted. A story teller cannot enchant a passive audience. People are active agents in the creation of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty. The word myth is used not only in the sense that the rhetoric of sovereignty clashes often with reality but also in a way that calls on Levi-Strauss's thesis that 'the purpose of myth is to provide a … model capable of overcoming a contradiction' (1963: 229). To borrow Beck's poignant terms, the enchanting myths of individual sovereignty is one of the key attempted 'biographical solution[s] to the systemic contradictions' of contemporary society (2001: 7).

And yet put in these terms it still seems difficult to believe that the enchanting myths of individual sovereignty can withstand their daily batterings against the rocks that are the structures of power. A link, a piece in the middle, is missing in the argument. The central argument of this article is that in many important spheres of society the menu operates as a key form of mediation between enchanting myths of individual sovereignty and structures of power. It acts as a buffer between the two in such a way as to allow their simultaneous co-existence. Menu is used here as a metaphor that can be applied to a wide range of settings. The restaurant menu serves as the basis for the metaphor. The restaurant menu is created to enchant and appeal to the customer, and it does this not only substantively through the descriptions of the available food, but also formally through the placing of the customer as the autonomous figure who chooses between available alternatives. This ritualized emphasis on autonomous choice can make the act of choosing as delicious as the actual food consumed. The customer here consumes the enchanting myth of sovereignty. For management, the genius of the menu is that it offers to the customer the image of sovereignty through autonomous choice, while at the same time constraining that choice. A menu not only offers choices but it necessarily

constrains options. In this way it allows rationalized production of food to go on unconsidered in the kitchen (see Gabriel, 1988). In other words, it allows often rationalized structures of power to operate alongside the myths of sovereignty within the 'free' sphere of consumption. It plays a key role in the creation of what Wood (1995: 99) has called the 'illusion of variety and choice' in restaurants that exists alongside the largely standardized meals that are served. What the menu leaves unsaid is that what is not on this menu is not available. But this message is present only by its absence, and the menu thus offers the customer the comfortable opportunity to experience the pleasure of choice. Further, many restaurants feature a ritualized presentation of the menu to the customers by a front line worker. Such a ritual serves to emphasize the pleasure of autonomous choice, the pleasure of individual sovereignty. A form of menu is presented, and with the same implications, not only in restaurants and cafes but also in a wide range of settings. In this, as in many other ways, the restaurant can be seen as a mirror of society (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). In a widely quoted piece, Miller and Rose argue that 'rationalities of autonomy have become operable, in part, because of the emergence of a plethora of discourses and practices for shaping and regulating the conduct, choices and desires of individuals' (1990: 25). In these terms, the enchanting myth of individual sovereignty can be seen as a 'rationality of autonomy', and the menu as a key practice for shaping choices and desires. Further, the menu connects these two elements. It not only shapes choices but at the same time it serves to reproduce the rationality of autonomy, the enchanting myth of individual sovereignty.

The menu may be attractive to a person not only because it places him/her as the autonomous chooser between alternatives but also because it operates as a form of filter that promises the opportunity to exercise real, and meaningful choice. The menu enables and constrains, and it can enable by constraining. It lends shape and pattern to the plethora of alternatives that are available in many social spheres in contemporary societies. In many social spheres people are confronted with increasingly fantastic amounts of information, more information than it is possible for an individual to process. In this situation meaningful choice is impossible. As Warde (1994: 892) argues, 'if people were making choices every time they confronted a situation of consumption, social life would become insupportable'. A filtering mechanism is needed to process the information to give the opportunity of meaningful choice. In many social spheres the menu operates exactly as this filtering mechanism. In Warde's terms, the menu as a filter operates as an important 'compensatory mechanism' that militates against the anxieties that might be expected to grow from modes of hyper-individualized consumption and identity formation envisaged by Bauman, Beck and Giddens.[1]

The menu, then, can operate at the level of the irrational and the rational. It can enchant through its glorification of the process of choice, and it can act as a filter to allow rational decision-making. At both levels, the metaphor of the menu raises questions about how far contemporary society can be characterized

as involving reflexive actors making informed, knowledgeable decisions. At the level of enchantment, the metaphor raises questions on whether the actor should rather be seen as enchanted than as knowledgeable. And at the level of filter, while it allows for a knowledgeable actor making a choice from a limited number of options, it raises the question of how this range of options is constructed in the first place.

Finally, it is necessary to make two clarifying points on the status of the menu concept. First, it should be observed that the metaphor of the menu in society is not itself an attempt to capture the essential nature of contemporary society. The concept of the menu in society does three things:

i) it posits the co-existence in many spheres of social life of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty with systems and structures of power;
ii) it suggests that in many cases the co-existence of these phenomena is enabled and enacted through the mediating role of the menu;
iii) it throws up questions that help engender a critical sociological investigation of spheres of social life.

These three qualities of the menu in society idea place it at the meso-level of social theorizing. It highlights and analyses a widespread social process without making claims that society is centrally defined by that process. Its compatibility with wider social theorizing is considered below.

The second clarifying point concerns the status of the menu concept vis-a-vis ontological frameworks of social analysis. It can be noted that there are surface affinities between the menu concept and structuration theory, particularly in terms of the way in which the analysis gives the menu the same duality of enablement and constraint as Giddens gives to social structures in his concept of structuration (Bryant and Jary, 1991). There are also some surface affinities between the menu concept and Bourdieu's social theorizing. The menu can be seen as a potentially important form of mediation between an individual's *habitus* and the *field* of wider social and power structures. However, while there may be some important compatibilities, the menu in society concept is not put forward as an explicitly structurationist or Bourdieuian concept. The menu concept ultimately operates at a different level of analysis from structuration and from habitus/field. Stucturationism is put forward as an attempt to overcome the dualism or dichotomies of structure and agency in all social settings – as are Bourdieu's pivotal concepts of habitus and field (Ritzer, 1996a). The menu in society concept, by contrast, is concerned with investigating the forms of mediation in contemporary Western societies that allow the co-existence of structures of power with individuals' heightened *sense* of agency and autonomy. The idea of the *sense* of autonomy is crucial to the menu concept, while this issue is not central to Giddens' and Bourdieu's concepts. In sum, the menu concept is not put forward to overcome structure-agency tension in social analysis – though it may be compatible with such approaches.

The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines how the menu operates, mediating structures of power and myths of individual sovereignty in three important spheres of society – in consumption, in production, and in citizenship. With the widespread nature of menu-mediation established, the article then considers how far the metaphor of the menu in society is compatible with important contemporary attempts to characterize the nature of society. The conclusion argues that the metaphor of the menu in society is useful not only because it helps us better understand the operation of contemporary society but also because it necessarily throws up questions that promote critical investigation into the nature of social settings.

Main Courses: The Menu in Society in Operation

The menu in a restaurant not only filters information, but it also promotes the creation of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty and creates a buffer between these myths and the unseen operation of rationalized structures of power in such a way as to allow the co-existence of both elements. The same process is played out in many social settings in contemporary society. Although these processes are rarely labelled as 'menus' the underlying process of mediation remains essentially identical. This section outlines the operation of this process of menu-mediation in consumption, in production, and in citizenship.

The Menu in Consumption

Enchanting myths of individual sovereignty are perhaps at their strongest within consumption. 'The customer is king'; 'the customer is always right'. It is not accidental that the singular form is used in these everyday phrases – everyday phrases that express widespread norms in contemporary societies (Edwards, 2000; MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996). As a number of authors have pointed out, consumption has become increasingly individualized (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). A key facet of contemporary consumption involves the playing out within the individual of an autonomous hedonism (Campbell, 1987). In this process the menu and its presentation help develop that 'distinctively modern faculty, the ability to create an illusion [here, of individual sovereignty] which is known to be false but felt to be true' (Campbell, 1987: 78). The menu operates to promote a form of social denial – a process, which Cohen (2001) argues, pervades everyday life.

For the consumer within service interactions, for instance, whether in shops, call centres, hotels, or bars, the (often ritualized) presentation of the menu is pervasive. The business strategy of 'mass customization' (Pine, 1993), which has grown substantially in recent decades, creates the options that can be offered to customers within service interactions. The new freedom of consumer choice is both imagined and real (Bauman, 1988). 'Would you like to roll over the balance on that account, put it into your savings account, or have a cheque

made out to you, sir/madam?' 'We have cafe latte, cappuccino, cafetière coffee, and mocha. Caffeinated or decaffeinated?' Increasingly central to the service interaction is the front line worker giving information on the menu, or options available, thereby setting the customer in the position of autonomous choice-maker, enchanting him/her with the process of choice as well as enchanting them through the substance of the options available.

In sales interactions, front line workers, charged with the specific task of pro-actively selling, also present the menu in such a way that the customer is placed as the autonomous decision-maker. A golden rule of the sales-techniques book and the managerialist prescriptive sales academic literature is that, 'sales-people need to offer information and advice in a way which allows the customer to maintain control over making the decision' (Schuster and Danes, 1986: 26). The classic way of doing this is to present a menu of options regarding the purchase which formally offers the customer the position of choice, but which substantively works to exclude the non-purchase option for the consumer. The presentation of the menu then features as a central part of what the sales literature calls the 'assumptive close'. 'What colour would you like it in? We have a range of reds and purples that might appeal to you.' 'When would you like it delivered? We can fit it in this week, or next week would also be possible. We can do it to suit you.' According to Leidner in her insightful study of sales workers, assumptive closes 'allowed agents to limit the customers' options without seeming to do so, to let prospects believe that they were making decisions while the agent remained in control of the interaction' (1993: 204). The presentation of the menu exactly suits to these delicate demands.

Another important form of menu in consumption is the best-seller chart, most famously present in relation to music sales, but increasingly evident in relation to a myriad of products. The presentation of the chart places the individual as the autonomous chooser, potentially enchanted not only by the substance of choice but also by the process of choice, and the chart's information-processing role gives meaning to the choices available. 'Will it be number one, next week?', millions of people have thought to themselves as part of the enchanting excitement of buying a pop single. As Attali (1985: 108) puts it, 'the hit parade … channels, selects and gives a value to things that would otherwise have none, that would float undifferentiated'. The chart is a notable form of menu because it appears to be directly created by people themselves. There is, however, a cottage industry within popular music studies which highlights the key roles of structures of power in directing this apparent 'semiotic democracy' (Fiske, 1987). For instance, the role of pluggers, and marketers, employed by large corporations, has been laid bare in a number of studies.

Another important example of the menu within consumption is the mall. Malls are modern cathedrals of consumption in which the promotion of enchantment is central (Ritzer, 1999). One of the key forms of enchantment that is promoted in malls is the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty that comes from the sheer choice that is afforded the customer. The mall operates as a form of meta-menu offering the choice to enter sites where micro-menus will

be presented. As Bryman (2003) has pointed out, however, beneath this enchanting surface of choice lie the careful calculations of rationalized capitalism. Combinations of shops, banks, cinemas etc. in malls are deliberately designed to maximize customer spending given carefully researched and calculated estimates of customer 'footfall'.

In these examples the menu and its presentation promote the development of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty among consumers. These menus also potentially allow these myths to be consumed at the same time as the rationalized structures of power of increasingly large production organizations operate unseen 'in the kitchen', on the other side of the menu.

The Menu in Production

The menu and its presentation are central to the whole project of human resource management (HRM) – a project which has been actively embraced by many cadres of management in many contemporary societies (Legge, 1995). Central to the project of HRM is the intention to alter the social relations of production from Fordist modes, in which labour consent is achieved through systems of coercive control, towards post-Fordist modes, in which labour commitment is achieved through 'soft' management systems (Korczynski et al., 2000). The menu and its presentation have pivotal roles to play in such systems.

Although parts of the HRM project relate to collective processes, such as teamwork and organizational culture, one of the myriad contradictions of the project is that the myth of individual autonomy played out through the mediation of the menu is also central to it. Kanter and Mirvis (1989) see the marketing of individualism as central to HRM. Guest (1990) shows how the HRM project is strongly related to the 'American Dream' in which myths of individual sovereignty, such as the myth of the lone cowboy, are inscribed. This can be seen by examining some of the core practices of this great HRM project: performance appraisals, training, career development and stress management. The performance appraisal is at the sharp end of the contradictory HRM project. It is where the management must exert control over a worker in such a way as to not only promote a better work ethic, but also a better work ethic which is self-authored by the worker. This is the essence of the 'commitment' to which many business writers refer. Note already that it is worker in the singular that is being used. HRM has tended to replace previous more collective-based reward systems with individual-centred systems. The key way in which management attempts to get the individual worker to author his/her own work ethic is through the menu and its ritualized presentation. The performance appraisal is structured as a (pseudo) dialogue in which the manager guides the worker through a series of stages in each of which the worker is presented with a menu of options. 'How do you rate your performance over the last six months against the targets that were agreed at your last appraisal meeting … Exceeded targets; Met targets; Fell below targets?' 'If you fell below targets, was this because: a) your focus was not as it should have been; b) your skills and knowledge need

to be developed; c) the support systems were not in place?' Within an overall exertion of hierarchical power, the worker is placed in a position of choice by the mediation of the menu of options. In this way, management hopes that the worker can emerge from the performance appraisal with the commitment to do 10 percent better in the next period. If it is to be true commitment, it must be self-authored and the process of its generation must involve the development of the enchanting myth of individual sovereignty. This is a myth that is made possible within the hierarchical structures of organizations by the mediation of the menu.

If the performance appraisal is at the sharp end of the contradictions of HRM, training and development appear to be at the soft end where there may be greater possibilities for a mutuality of interest between the worker and the organization. Here, again, the HRM project tends to involve the worker as an individual rather the workforce as a collective. And again the mediation role of the menu is crucial. Individuals are presented with a menu of options regarding training and development courses and packages. In this way they are implicitly placed as the autonomous chooser from among enticingly presented alternatives. Through the operation of the menu they are potentially enchanted with myths of their individual sovereignty at the same time as the overall operation of organizational power occurs through the hierarchical structuring of the extent and types of choices available.

Similar processes can occur within the actual training courses that are attended. One of the most common forms of training courses run in organizations involves the development of teamwork through the Belbin principles. Devized by Belbin (1981), the process involves individuals filling in a self-reporting questionnaire in which the questions are designed to assess the key personality characteristics of individuals. The questionnaires are then analysed and individuals are placed into one of a number of character types. Each character type is set up to match on to a particular role within what is seen as an ideal division of labour within a team. So the character types range from 'chairman' (sic), who is 'calm, self-confident and controlled', and 'company worker', who is 'conservative, dutiful and predictable', to 'shaper', who is 'highly strung, outgoing and dynamic' (1981: 74). Overall, the process can be seen to effectively legitimize power structures by implicitly legitimizing the idea that a strict division of labour should exist within teams. The process involves the reproduction of power structures and it also involves the promotion of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty. In the Belbin process, people make themselves up as particular types of individuals and in this process the menu is central. People are not simply labelled as character types by an outside observer, rather they make themselves up as that character type freely through the process of choice from the menu of options in the questionnaire. They assign themselves points with regard to how a menu of statements applies to themselves. For instance, in being questioned about their involvement with other people in a project an individual can agree to the statement, ' I have an aptitude for influencing people without pressurizing them' or 'my general vigilance prevents

careless mistakes and omissions being made' (1981: 148). Further, in the Belbin training process, the menu does not just operate within the questionnaire but also, implicitly, within the range of possible character types that one can be. Those who make themselves up to be a 'company worker' can look across the menu of character types and think to themselves that in fact they would like to be a 'chairman' sort of character. They will easily find further training courses or self-help books to guide them in their journey of becoming. Individuals come to discipline themselves, and allow power structures to be reproduced, through the mediating role of the menu.

A similar process occurs regarding the organization of career development. Broadly, we can say that the structuring of careers around the workforce as a collectivity (for instance, through the operation of seniority systems) has been significantly attenuated (Arnold, 1997). Instead, careers are increasingly presented as something that the individual worker is supposed to author for him or herself (Sennett, 1998). In career 'counselling' within organizations, individuals are again ritually presented with the menu of options, each enticingly described. Individuals are typically presented with the options of: a) deepening their skills and knowledge in their current area; b) moving laterally in the organization; c) potentially moving vertically in the current section by taking on managerial duties and undertaking management training. The operation of power, here present by the absence of the organization's responsibility to set a clear career path for an individual, occurs at the same time as the individual feels that he or she is authoring his/her own destiny. The menu provides the mediation to potentially allow both to occur simultaneously.

Another contradiction of the HRM project is the acknowledgement of the need for stress management. Within these stress management courses the primary focus is upon the individual worker (Newton et al., 1995). The aim is to make the individual worker 'stress fit', able to cope with the pressures of their working lives. Important here is the presentation to the individual worker of a menu of options which he or she can adopt in his/her own stress management. For instance, Mann's (1999) managerialist text prescribes that those who are suffering from stress through the delivery of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in their jobs should choose from a menu of stress management techniques. Individuals are encouraged to choose from a menu of 'calming strategies' and forms of 'cognitive restructuring'. Examples include 'taking a few deep breaths', 'relaxation techniques', 'visualization techniques', and re-imagining stressful incidents through 'self-talk'. Here, as in many other stress management approaches, the individual worker is placed as the sovereign individual, owner of his/her own emotions, through the process of choice among the menu of alternatives. At the same as the worker is encouraged to experience a sense of his/her own sovereignty, power structures are enacted. The whole approach depoliticizes the issue of stress. By focusing on the individual and making the individual stress fit, it deflects from an examination of the organizational causes of stress – in the case of emotional labour delivery, for instance, management's insistence that workers put up with a high level of abuse from customers.

Further, it depoliticizes by focusing on the individual and marginalizes the collective workforce and its institutions such as trade unions, who would be more likely to challenge the organizational, rather than the individual causes.

Much critical literature on HRM shows how far the espoused aims, the rhetoric, of management falls far short of the reality of the practices actually implemented (Legge, 1995). What tends to be left unasked here, is how it is that such rhetoric and reality can co-exist. A focus on the mediating role of the menu allows us to see that the HRM project is bound up with the rhetoric of individual notions of sovereignty and that it involves the reality of the playing out of hierarchical power within organizations. Enchanting rhetoric and harsh reality can, potentially, systematically co-exist due in no small part to the mediating role of the menu.

The Menu in Citizenship

As a number of authors have discussed, the citizen in contemporary society is increasingly being recast as a customer (Bauman, 1988; Pollitt, 1990). For instance, the so-called Citizen's Charter is underpinned not by a concept of citizens coming together in the public domain, but rather by an ideal, or an enchanting myth, of the sovereignty of the individual customer. At the same time, of course, state bodies continue to function as important structures of power in contemporary society. In the sphere of citizenship, as in consumption and production, the menu operates as a form of mediation to potentially allow the co-existence of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty and structures of centralized power. People can see themselves as autonomous sovereigns through the act of individual choice from among the options presented to them in the menu. This process is briefly discussed in relation to unemployed welfare recipients and health care.

The person who registers for unemployment benefit from the welfare state is now labelled a 'customer' in the official discourse of the UK Employment Services (Bishop et al., 2005). This 'customer' is encouraged to consume an enchanting myth of his/her own sovereignty through the ritualized presentation of a menu of options. The benefits agency staff typically present the person with a menu of options regarding potentially suitable jobs available and for which the person could apply. Each of the options is presented in their most attractive light, just as they are on the restaurant menu. So, for instance, the low paid job of receptionist involves 'working with people'. Similarly, if the period of unemployment persists, the person is presented with a menu of options regarding the types of training that are available. The person is placed as the autonomous chooser from among the attractive options available.

It is in the UK health care public services that the most deliciously bizarre manifestations of the menu in society have emerged. In this sector, the choices available to the 'consumer' are severely constrained – in many cases de facto monopoly provision obtains for logistical and efficiency reasons, and in many cases 'consumers' necessarily lack the appropriate knowledge to act as rational

consumers should, not least when they are in suffering (the root etymology of 'patient' [Korczynski, 2002]). Despite this, the dressings of choice afforded by the appearance of the menu are in evidence. Health care 'consumers' are increasingly asked to fill in satisfaction surveys, to which management attach increasing importance (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994). The satisfaction survey is a form of menu in which the individual 'consumer' chooses between selected answers to a series of questions. Another way in which the metaphorical menu is emerging in health care is in the form of the literal menu. In the light of much media interest, Lloyd Grossman, a media personality famous for his overt connoisseurship of food, was appointed as a key consultant in the revamping of National Health Service hospital food. Key to this project has been the creation not only of substantively valuable food, but also of attractive menus, which appeal through their form. The menu in hospital beguiles not only through its attractive descriptions of the substantive food, but also, potentially, because it enchantingly places the otherwise powerless 'consumer' as the sovereign, the autonomous chooser between alternatives. At the same time, the surface rhetoric of choice is likely to lie uneasily in institutions which are inscribed by a lack of choice for service-recipients.

Side Dishes: The Menu and Characterizations of Contemporary Society

We now turn to the question of how far the menu metaphor as a form of meso-analysis is compatible (or incompatible) with key contemporary macro-level characterizations of society. This section shows that the idea of the menu in society can help develop George Ritzer's (1996b, 1998) idea of the McDonaldization of society, and is rather more straightforwardly compatible with Naomi Klein's (2000) vision of the branded society, and Scott Lash and John Urry's (1994) characterization of contemporary 'economies of signs and space'.

Ritzer asks us to believe that we live in a largely McDonaldized society in which the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control enacted within large organizations structure our social spheres. Through this lens, the concept of the menu mediation could emphasize how menus are used to further the four key elements of McDonaldization. The menu is designed to allow the organization to operate efficiently – concentrating on the rationalized production of the limited options listed on the menu. The menu can offer calculability, predictability, and control by channelling customers in prescribed directions. Further, the use of the menu in society concept with the concept of McDonaldization can help address a key weakness of Ritzer's argument – namely that his idea of the McDonaldization of society allows little conceptual space for understanding the agency of people within the large and controlling McDonaldized structures. At its worst, the McDonaldization argument resorts to labelling people within McDonaldized structures as akin to 'mechanical nuts'

(Ritzer, 1996b: 63) and 'human robots' (Ritzer, 1998: 60). The concept of the menu in society can help open up this conceptual space by focusing on modes of mediation that can allow the co-existence of structures of power with modes of agency centring on the creation of individuality.

Klein's characterization of the branded logo society offers a more clearly welcoming home for the concept of the menu in society. Klein's work is an attempt to link, conceptually and politically, the branded choices offered to Western consumers with the degrading conditions of labour in industrializing countries and, to a lesser extent, in the Western economies' service industries. Her project, therefore, has important affinities with the idea of the menu in society, which investigates the mediation between individual choices and structures of power. There are important similarities between the brand and the menu. Both potentially offer people forms of identity: the brand offers an enchanting substantive identity linked to the sign-value of the particular brand; the menu offers an enchanting sense of individual autonomy through the process of choice itself. Further, at one level, brands can effectively function as menus. The brand functions to offer enchanting choice within the branded range of goods. The Nike symbol implicitly draws attention to the wide range of Nike-labelled goods. Within this brand as menu, Klein assumes the hidden hand guiding choice: 'The real question is not "Where do you want to go today?" but "How best can I steer you into the synergized maze of where I want you to go today?" (2000: 129). The idea of the menu in society is compatible with this assumption, but, as elaborated in the next section, does not necessarily carry this assumption. The concept of the menu in society pronounces the importance of asking the question rather than of assuming an answer to the question.

The concept of the menu in society is also compatible with Lash and Urry's influential argument about the existence of *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994). For Lash and Urry, economies are populated by increasingly reflexive subjects who produce and consume mainly informational and symbolic goods in processes of mobility and flow across ever greater distances. On the basis of this argument, a key unit for sociological analysis becomes the flow of the social and the cultural across time and space. The idea of the menu in society draws attention to the menu as a key meta-level sign operating in society. In the post-industrial economy, not only are goods themselves signs, but, crucially, the way in which these goods are offered is also itself a sign of considerable significance. The menu in society concept also prompts sociological investigation into the consequences of this menu-sign for the spatial ordering of society. As discussed above, the menu in the restaurant functions to allow a spatial and social separation of kitchen production from the world of food consumption. Lash and Urry's book prompts us to look for the key signs and spatial orderings of society. The menu in society concept takes up this challenge by identifying a key sign and argues that this may play a key role in the spatial ordering of society.

Desserts: Menus and Questions

The argument so far has been that the metaphor of the menu in society captures key aspects of many social processes in contemporary society. It allows us a better understanding of those social processes. It has also been pointed out that the idea of the menu in society exists at the meso-level of theorizing, and that it is a concept that is compatible with a number of the more penetrating recent macro-analyses of contemporary society. All these are qualities that make the concept of the menu in society appealing. This concluding section argues for another important quality of the menu in society metaphor – that its use necessarily throws up questions that promote a critical sociological investigation into the nature of many social settings. The four key questions that its use throws up are expounded in turn.

1. What Is Not on the Menu?

The menu itself, aided by the ritualized presentation that often accompanies it, calls attention to itself, to the substantive choices that it offers to the person, whether as a consumer, a worker, or a citizen. The idea of the menu in society, however, also calls our attention to what is not on the menu. It calls attention to absences in choices offered and to what these absences signify. It poses the questions whether there are patterns in what is absent in menus, and whether these patterns directly or indirectly match the interests of powerful segments of the social sphere. So, for instance, in the example of menu in Belbin teamwork training, it can be noted that what is not on the menu is the person who would like to be fully involved at all stages of the production process, from conception to design to implementation. An argument then can be constructed that this patterned absence fits the sort of specialism in the division of labour advocated by Adam Smith and Frederick Taylor. The question of what is not on the menu speaks directly to what Lukes (1974) terms the third dimension in the operation of power, involving a 'consideration of the many ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics' (p. 24). It also speaks directly to the critical media studies analysis of 'agenda-setting'. It may be that on investigation the absences in menus are not patterned in ways that meet the interests of powerful segments in social spheres. The point is not to assume a certain answer to the question. The point is the importance of asking the question in the first place.

2. Who Writes the Menu?

The menu draws attention to the substance of the choices that it offers and perhaps to itself as an elegant artefact. The idea of the menu in society forces us to look beyond this to also ask who has written the menu. As sociologists it is not enough for us to point out how patterned absences on menus may suit the interests of powerful groups, it is also incumbent on us to examine the social processes by which these absences are written into the menu. To do

otherwise is to lapse into the laziness of functionalist analysis. In examining the authorship of menu it may be that we immediately see the operation of a technocratic elite of experts who seek to maintain a monopoly on the right to author menus in particular social spheres. For instance, Bauman (1988: 67) intimates the importance of technical experts and the perpetuation of their power systems in the provision of choice to consumers: 'individuals depend on the market and the experts for being individuals – that is being able to make free choices ... Individual freedom becomes an important link in the process of reproduction of the power structure'. It may also be that we see the clash of competing authors, perhaps the technical expert, the chef, fighting with the instrument of capitalist rationality, the restaurant manager, over what should and should not be on the menu. Again the point is not to assume an answer to the question, but rather to stress that the menu metaphor directs us towards this crucial question.

3. How Does the Menu Create us as Individuals?

The menu, through its form and its often ritualized presentation, promotes an enchanting myth of individual sovereignty. Critical investigation guided by the idea of the menu in society can take this as a starting point and probe how far and in what ways this form of enchantment is actually enacted by people. The promotion of enchantment should not be read as equivalent to its enactment. To return to a point made in the introduction, one of the key qualities of enchantment is that it must involve an active role on the part of the enchanted. Critical investigation can focus upon understanding both the active embracing of this enchantment, and the active or passive resistance to it. Passive resistance to promoted enchantment, for instance, may involve the mundane and every-day use of unconscious habit to underlie decisions (Groncow and Warde, 2001), thereby precluding any enchantment linked to the glorification of the process of choice. Critical investigation can look at the cracks of disillusion-ment where enchantment fades. For instance, disillusionment is likely to occur where the absences of the menu rise into clear view. Think of the restaurant cus-tomer who orders a meal from a menu only to be told that the dishes are no longer available. Disappointment at the unavailability of a specific dish may slide into disillusionment, as the artifice of the menu, its functioning as that which offers and constrains choice, comes into view. The apparently rising phenomenon of customer anger and abuse may be partly informed by such a movement from enchantment to disillusionment. Further, investigation can also usefully focus on different patterns to the way in which enchantment is embraced or resisted between different social spheres. As Gabriel and Lang (1995) point out, consumers are, to significant degree, 'unmanageable', but, in relation to the menu, is this true to the same degree of people in the spheres of production and citizenship?

4. Does the Menu Serve to Shield One Social Sphere from Another, and with what Consequences?

In the restaurant, the menu, as much as the swinging kitchen door, serves to shield the spheres of privileged, and partly hedonistic, consumption from the sphere of rationalized and hierarchical production. In Daniel Bell's terms, the menu serves to allow *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) to co-exist by keeping them in separate spheres. The enchantment offered by the menu serves to divert the gaze of the customer away from potentially disturbing aspects within the sphere of production – aspects like the widespread, highly precarious forms of low wage employment in the hospitality industry (Paules, 1991), and like the demands for sexualized forms of labour to which many female staff in the industry are subject (Adkins, 1995). The idea of the menu in society asks us to consider the consequences of the customer's gaze moving from the menu to observe the sphere of restaurant production. It implicitly asks us to take part in breaking down the divisions between social spheres that exist in globalized capitalism to allow a properly informed and democratic dialogue about the social spheres being created presently in separation from each other. As Klein (2000: 346) argues, 'despite the rhetoric of One Worldism, the planet remains sharply divided between producers and consumers, and the enormous profits raked in by the superbrands are premised upon these worlds remaining as separate from each other as possible'. The idea of the menu in society can contribute to these, at present largely non-observed, divisions being first observed and then questioned.

All of the above questions force us to consider the implicit political dimensions of the menu. The menu functions as a key form of information-processing filter, and it is important for us to interrogate the political processes and outcomes that are also part of this information-processing. The idea of the menu in society then, not only allows us a better understanding of many social spheres but it also throws up questions that allow us to begin questioning those social spheres.

Note

1   Note that this does not suggest that there are not other important compensatory mechanisms at play within consumption, as well – such as the forms of habit and convention, and the role of social contacts that Warde highlights (1994; also Groncow and Warde, 2001). The point is that the menu operates as *one* potentially important mechanism, working against the widespread anxieties that might arise from over-burdening choice. In addition, the menu can operate *with* other compensating mechanisms, such as habit driving choices from a menu.

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