BOBOs IN PARADISE

David Brooks

How Boomers are blending the rebellion of the 60s with the materialism of the 80s to create a Bourgeois Bohemian culture

It used to be easy to distinguish between the bourgeois and bohemians. Now they’re all mixed up and you can’t tell an espresso-sipping potter from a cappucino-drinking banker.

Old categories:

**Bourgeois:** the square ones
- defenders of the tradition and middle class morality
- work for corporations and went to church
  - perceived as uptight and boring by bohemians

**Bohemians:** the free spirited 60s generation
- flouted convention
- the artists and intellectuals – beats and hippies

Late 1990s cultural landscape:
- all bourgeois and bohemian styles mixed up
- bankers sit in coffeehouses listening to alternative music
- Apple and Gap cite Gandhi and Kerouac
- Crate and Barrell – chopping tables fashioned copied from farms of French peasant: styles = A year in Provence but prices say: Two Decades Out of Medical School

More than a matter of fashion accessories
BOBO culture = synthesis of bohemian and bourgeois values permeates attitudes towards sex, morality, leisure time, work, pleasure, ambition, politics, and even God
- can’t distinguish between anti-establishment renegade and pro-establishment company man

Culture war between 60s Woodstock generation and 80s Reaganites

But mainstream boomers adopt attitudes and lifestyles of both

BOBOs are richer and more worldly than hippies
but more spiritualized than the stereotypical Yuppies

BOBO culture = final resting spot for the baby boomer generation

**HISTORY and EVOLUTION**

Boomers born into world dominated by WASP aristocracy – late 40s, 50s, 60s

Entered college in 60s and rebelled against WASP values and establishment

Core of radicalism = challenge WASP notion of success
WASP affluence $\rightarrow$ bohemian reject materialism

WASP politeness $\rightarrow$ bohemian rawness

WASP chaste pretensions $\rightarrow$ bohemian promiscuous pretensions

WASP success $\rightarrow$ bohemian “dropout” of rat race; retreated into communes

Utopianism not popular among college grads

By late 80s INFORMATION AGE economy kicked in and rewarded education with dough

Anti-materialist boomers now rolling in stock options

INFO Economy allowed boomers to make money without abandoning their artistic/rebel roots

Ideas and knowledge as vital as natural resources and financial capital

New buzz words of 90s $\rightarrow$ “INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL” and “CULTURE INDUSTRY”

Synergism between bohemian creativity and bourgeois marketplace

Anxieties of affluence: how to spend new wealth
Without betraying bohemian values

**CODE OF FINANCIAL CORRECTNESS**

1. **Only vulgarians spend lavish amounts of money on luxuries. Cultivate people restrict their lavish spending on necessities**
   
   $25K$ bathroom OK; $15K$ home entertainment system is crass
   
   $10K$ outdoor Jacuzzi is crass; $20K$ slate shower stall = appreciate simple rhythms of life
   
   $65K$ Range Rover > $60K$ Porsche

2. **It is perfectly acceptable to spend lots of money on anything that is of “professional quality,” even if it has nothing to do with your profession**
   
   $300$ industrial strength toasting system > $30$ toaster
   
   $55$ gourmet gardening tools > $6$ Kmart hoe

3. **You must practice the perfectionism of small things**
   
   Right pasta drainer, distinctive doornob, ingeniously designed cork-screws, Swiss-made KWC faucet
   
   No gaudy possessions that make extravagant statements – crass, trying to impress
Go for rare gadgets not discovered by masses

4. You can never have too much texture

80s Yuppies = polished lacquer floors, sleek faux-marbleized walls

BOBOs: texture i.e. roughness and irregularities connotes authenticity and virtue

5. The educated elites are expected to practice one-downmanship

Repelled by idea of keeping up with Joneses
Reject status symbols

Possessions – furnishings, appliances → more peasantry, expresses simplicity

Prize old things – timeless by their obsolescence
- turn-of-century carpentry tools, butter churns, etc

Co-optation of oppressed cultures → reject European aristocratic styles; African mask, Inca statute, Tibetan cloth

6. Educated elites are expected to spend huge amounts of money on things that used to be cheap

Reject foie gras, caviar, truffles

Go for same items as the proletariat
- chicken legs: free range chicken
- potatoes: distinctive miniature from northern France
- lettuce: flimsy cognoscenti lettuces

Beauty of this strategy:
Allows BOBOs to be egalitarian and pretentious at the same time!

7. Members of the educated elite prefer stores that give more product choices than they could ever want but which don’t dwell on anything so vulgar as prices

Distinguished by not only WHAT they but also by HOW they buy; avoid mass-marketed products

Beer: order one of 16,000 microbrews, winter ales, Belgian lagers, blended wheats

Coffee: order a double espresso, half-decaf-half caffeinated, with mocha and room for milk

Markets now offer dozen of varieties of rice, milk, tomatoes, mushrooms, hot sauces, beans, even iced tea (>50 flavors of Snapple!)

Midas in reverse:

Marx: bourgeois takes all that is scared and makes it profane
BOBOs take everything that is profane and make it sacred
- something that might have been grubby and materialistic and turned it into somethin gelevated

BOBOs take the quintessential bourgeois activity, shopping and turn it into quintessential bohemian activities: art, philosophy, social action.

BOBOs posses the Midas touch in reverse. Everything BOBOs handle turns into soul.

**BOBOs turn the world upside down and transform sector after sector of American life:**

BOBOs found web-page design firms and remain artists and still drive a Lexus

BOBOs turn university towns like Palo Alto and Princeton into entrepreneurial centers

BOBOs reconcile highbrow with high tax bracket

BOBOs reconciled undergrad casual fashions with upper-income occupations

CEOs and management gurus talk about smashing the status quo and crushing the establishment:

Tom Peters: “Destruction is cool”

Lucent Technologies: “Born to be Wild”

Burger King: “Sometimes You’ve Gotta to Break the Rules

BOBOs invaded the business world and brought their counter-cultural mental framework with them

1967 book by Kenneth Keniston, “Young Radicals”

“.. in manner and style, these young radicals are extremely personalistic, focused on face-to-face, direct and open relationships with other people; hostile to formally structured roles and traditional bureaucratic patters of power and authority”

This sums up the management philosophy that prevails today in corporate America – and oddly it works as a profit-maximizing tool.

Social critic: hippie culture will undermine capitalist culture

1990s reality: merger of these two cultures has produced a synergy which has unleashed an unprecendented period of business innovation and productivity.

**BOBOs and spirituality**

Boomers rejected the too conformist world of the 60s and sought greater individualism and self-expression.
In spiritual pursuits → sought the transcendent experiences and pure freedom → New Age and Eastern Mysticism

But found that individualistic spirituality is very hard to pass down to your kids → many now reluctantly returning to the institutionalized faiths they once rejected – doing so for the sake of the kids!

FLEXIDOXY: rabbi preaching a style of Judaism
Starts with flexibility and freedom and a desire to ground spiritual life within tangible reality, ordained rituals and binding connections that are based on deeper ties than rationality and choice

DANGER OF BOBOism

Could result in national shallowness and disengagement with corporate life

Aim for decency but not saintliness, civility but not truth

Too pragmatic a lifestyle resulting in an  
    Age of Complacency – too comfortable and soft

    Lost faith in public institutions and many private ones

    Healthy skepticism → corrosive negativism

Consumed by pursuits of the good life … to the neglect of patriotic service and the challenges of national life and global leadership