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Are you a BOurgeois BOhemian?

We've had Hippies, Yuppies, Buppies and Dinkies. Now it's time for the Bobos. Melinda Wittstock in New York reports on the rise of the new urban upper class

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It's hard to miss them: The epitome of casual 'geek chic' and organised within the warranty of their Palm Pilots, they sip labour-intensive café lattes, chat on sleek cellphones and ponder the road to enlightenment. In the US they worry about the environment as they drive their gas-guzzling sports utility vehicles to emporiums of haute design to buy a \$50 titanium spatula; they think about their tech stocks as they explore speciality shops for Tibetan artefacts in Everest-worthy hiking boots. They think nothing of laying out \$5 for a wheatgrass muff, much less \$500 for some alternative rejuvenation at the day-spa - but don't talk about raising their taxes.

They are 'bourgeois bohemians' - or 'Bobos' - and they're the new 'enlightened élite' of the information age, their lucratively busy lives a seeming synthesis of comfort and conscience, corporate success and creative rebellion. Well-educated thirty-to-fortysomethings, they have forged a new social ethos from a logic-defying fusion of 1960s counter-culture and 1980s entrepreneurial materialism.

So proclaims David Brooks, the American journalist and self-avowed

'Bobo', who coined the phrase to describe the new cultural and corporate hegemony of his cosmopolitan, computer-savvy contemporaries, many of whom will no doubt recognise themselves in Bobos In Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There .

'These Bobos define our age. They are the new establishment. Their hybrid culture is the atmosphere we all breathe,' Brooks declares in his 'comic sociology' of Bobo manners and mores. 'Their status codes now govern social life.' A phenomenon in step with the hard-driving digital utopianism promised by the internet and its money-spinning 'new economy', not to mention the 'Third Way' politics of President Clinton and Tony Blair, the Bobos have seized upon an ingenious way to sell without selling out - or so they tell themselves.

Combining the free-spirited, artistic rebelliousness of the bohemian beatnik or hippie with the worldly ambitions of their bourgeois corporate forefathers, the Bobo is a comfortable contortion of caring capitalism. 'It's not about making money,' writes Brooks, 'it's about doing something you love. Life should be an extended hobby. It's all about working for a company as cool as you are.'

It is a world inhabited by dotcom millionaires, management consultants, 'culture industry' entrepreneurs and all manner of media folk, most earning upwards of \$100,000 a year - their money, claims Brooks, an incidental byproduct of their maverick mores, 'the kind of money you happen to earn while you are pursuing your creative vision'. Often sporting such unconventional job titles as 'creative paradox', 'corporate jester' or 'learning person', Bobos work with a monk-like self-discipline because they view their jobs as intellectual, even spiritual. 'It is a reverse Midas touch: everything a Bobo touches turns to spirituality, everything has to be about enlightenment. Even their jobs are a mission to improve the world,' says Brooks, himself a political columnist for the conservative Weekly Standard.

Clearly the Bobo is not entirely new - think Virgin's Richard Branson, the Body Shop's Anita Roddick and Apple Computer's Steve Jobs. But suddenly Bobos are everywhere, or so it struck Brooks after four years abroad in the 1990s. His wealthy white-bread Pennsylvania hometown was now firmly focaccia, with half a dozen new gourmet coffee shops,

independent booksellers and countless purveyors of 'fat smelly candles' and 'hand-painted TV armoires'.

'It was now impossible to tell an espresso-sipping artist from a cappuccino-gulping banker,' observed Brooks - but it wasn't just a matter of style. 'I found that if you investigated people's attitudes towards sex, morality, leisure time and work, it was getting harder and harder to separate the anti-establishment renegade from the pro-establishment company man. Most people seemed to have rebel attitudes and social-climbing attitudes all scrambled together.'

Sounds familiar, says British trend-spotter Peter York. 'I am a good example of a bourgeois bohemian, well a little more bourgeois than bohemian, but I'm it. I've been thinking about Bobos for months; they are all around me, and they've been a long time coming, in a sense, a no-brainer, an inevitable "end of history" phenomenon, with all ideological wars ended, religious schisms over.'

York says there are more than a million British Bobos, sharing with their US counterparts the same proclivities for spiritual growth, creative fulfilment, Tuscan-tiled stainless steel kitchens, distressed Third World antiques and hi-tech titanium sporting gear. 'Most likely they live in Notting Hill or some other urban confluence of dressed-down bohemian wealth, and their home decor says, "I've been there, I smoke a bit of dope".'

Names, I want names, I tell Brooks. 'Well, writing for The Observer counts,' he tells me, 'and the BBC, the BBC is a red-hot centre of Boboism, though [Jeremy] Paxman is too angry to qualify.'

'As for me, I'm a confirmed Bobo. Now half-author, half-salesman, I've been stunned by how much I've taken up the selling fervour.' But not everyone is buying it.

'It's a misnomer, a simple-minded idea and a convenient cover for baby-boomers to feel proud of themselves,' says Debbie Geller, an American who produces BBC arts and culture documentaries. 'These Bobos are just normal middle-class people who can't accept that status because they've always hated it. They are living out a protracted

adolescence.'

Toby Miller, a professor of popular culture at New York University, suspects Boboism has more to do with style than substance. 'But Brooks is on to something significant: the Bobo is at once a social liberal and an economic conservative; freedom and justice for all, they say, but don't worry about systematic economic inequality.'

Their political interests, Miller says, are either 'intensely close and personal' (abortion or gun control), or very remote (the rainforests, Tibet or Third World poverty.) But they will most likely express their conscience in their consumerism, relieved to be helping someone somewhere by collecting the hand-carved artefacts of distant cultures.

While bemoaning the Bobo's 'boring politics', Brooks believes the Bobos to be an élite superior to their intolerant and warring predecessors - 'they've certainly made shopping more fun, and they have a good morality for building a decent society,' he says.

'This is an élite that has been raised to oppose élites. They are by instinct anti-establishmentarian, yet somehow sense they have become a new establishment. They are prosperous without seeming greedy; they have pleased their elders, without seeming conformist; they have risen toward the top without too obviously looking down on those below,' he says.

Motivated by 'spiritual participation, but cautious of moral crusades and religious enthusiasms, they tolerate a little lifestyle experimentation, so long as it is done safely and moderately. They are offended by concrete wrongs, such as cruelty and racial injustice, but are relatively unmoved by lies or transgressions that don't seem to do anyone any obvious harm.'

For now, the old fiery antipathy between bourgeois and bohemian is a distant memory, tensions reconciled, and corporate advertising is finding inspiration in Jack Kerouac, Gandhi and 'Born to be Wild'.

We have reached the point, says Brooks, where 'the hedonism of Woodstock mythology has been domesticated and now serves as a

management tool for the Fortune 500.

'The intangible world of information merges with the material world of money, and new phrases that combine the two, such as "intellectual capital" and "the culture industry", come into vogue. So the people who thrive in this period are the ones who can turn ideas and emotions into products.'

Indeed, the one realm of American life where the language of 1960s radicalism remains strong is the business world, says Brooks. 'We're by now all familiar with modern-day executives who have moved from SDS to CEO, from LSD to IPO. Indeed, sometimes you get the impression the Free Speech Movement produced more corporate executives than Harvard Business School.'

'Where do you want to go today?' asks the Microsoft commercial. Somewhere ex-otic. Somewhere lucrative. Somewhere 'fashionably en-lightened', maybe Brooks's new local supermarket. 'It's taken the ethos of California in the 1960s and selectively updated it. Gone are the Sixties-era things that were fun for teenagers, like free love, and retained are all the things that might be of interest to middle-aged hypochondriacs, like whole grains.'

Ten ways to tell you're a Bobo

Do you:

Believe that shelling out £10,050 on a home media centre is vulgar, but that spending it on a slate shower stall is a sign you are at one with the Zen-like rhythms of nature?

Work for a company as cool, hip and enterprising as you?

GO ON adventure seeking vacations to the remotest parts of the world to X-treme ski, mountain climb or whitewater raft, or do you simply settle for a ride in the sport utility vehicle to the nearest haute-design shops and local purveyors of Third World treasures?

Dress 'geek chic' or hippy chick - and don't forget the titanium Omnitech athletic gear?

Have a newly renovated kitchen which looks like an aircraft hangar with plumbing - even after the feng shui?

Give to Tibet, but not always to the local homeless?

Feel cheated and betrayed if a big supermarket sign that normally says 'Organic Items Today: 130' today counts only 60?

Earn upwards of £67,000 but were never in it for the money?

Buy Third World to save the Third World?

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