

Conspicuous leisure and Conspicuous consumption

Thorstein Veblen

1857-1929

Thorstein Veblen

- American economist – critic of capitalism and the wastes generated by American affluence
- Was of Norwegian descent and a marginal figure in American academia – farmer turned academic – personal habits not disciplined
- Unpopular teacher – mumbled- considered dull and a failure
- 1899 – book titled, ‘The theory of the leisure class. An economic study of institutions,’ - coined the concept of conspicuous consumption



C. Wright Mills

- Veblen's work – protest against the two sociological trends in the US –
- High statistics – data – cannot tell the truth and falsity
- Grand theory- verbose- congested- bookish- reproduce other's views
- Veblen's work is a live protest against it



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- Unconventional style of academic writing – not much analysis
 - Hilarious way of expression – bitter critic of American lifestyle
 - But interesting ideas – written in 1900s but relevant today
 - Veblen's conspicuous consumption widely read even by the leisure classes



Producers and consumers

- Some kind of evolutionary approach to stratification, class and economic behavior – not much data or references
- Focused on the consumption patterns produced by different modes of production
- He found a tension between production, workmanship, on the one hand and consumption, status and honor, on the other



His concerns

- How in different stages of social evolution occupations involving producing the needs of daily life get divided from those that bring honor, status and victory to the group
- Military, priestly, intellectual engagements and sports come in the latter category and have greater social status attached to them
- The latter will not engage in day to day acts of production and are not required to



The institution of the leisure class - Introductory

- Early forms of hunting and nomadic societies did not have a leisure class
 - Everyone had to work to produce for the needs of the group
 - In lower stages of barbarism (this is Veblen's usage), leisure class is not fully developed
 - North American hunting tribes had division of labor but could not have a strata engaged in leisure
 - Women are also engaged in occupation for livelihood
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- It is in the higher stages of barbarian culture that leisure class emerges
 - When there is enough surplus to support a non-working strata
 - In such societies distinctions between classes are strictly maintained



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- In feudal Europe and feudal Japan, the upper classes were by custom exempt from industrial occupations
 - Chief among the honorable employments of these classes was warfare; priestly services as well
 - If the community is not warlike, priestly services will take precedence
 - But warriors and priests are excluded from physical labor and this is an economic expression of their superior rank
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Nobles, priests and the military

- There could be divisions within the leisure class – hierarchy between government- military and religious observances
- Diverse occupations
- One common economic characteristic - they are non-industrial
- Manual labor, industry and the work of earning daily livelihood – occupations of inferior classes
- The inferior classes includes slaves, servants and ordinarily, also the women



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- The men of aristocratic classes are not only exempted, but debarred by custom from all industrial employment/gainful labor.
 - War, politics, sports, learning and priestly office
 - The lower strata in the aristocracy may follow some industrial occupations but mostly those that are subsidiary to the leisure –class occupations

 - For instance, the manufacture of arms, canoes, the dressing of horses, preparation of sacred apparatus
 - Industrial working classes will have nothing to do with these occupations
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The later barbarian mentality

- Unlike the hunter, the higher barbarians did not see themselves as labourers like the hunter who gets the food for daily life
- His efforts are not to be seen as the drudgery that women are engaged in
- Maintenance of the groups through excellence and efficacy not diligence like women



Women

- In the higher aristocracy women of high rank are also exempt from industrial employment
- The occupations as fishery, toys and sporting goods making are doubtfully classed as industrial
- The industrial employments of later stages are outgrowth of what is classed as women's work in primitive barbarism



Communities without leisure class

- Communities without defined leisure class such as the savages are small groups – simple structure
- commonly peaceable and sedentary
- They are poor and individual ownership is not a feature


- Tribes of Andaman and the Todas of Nilgris for instance
- Notable feature – certain ‘amiable inefficiency’ when confronted with force or fraud



Emergence of leisure class

- The conditions necessary:
 - The community must be of predatory habit of life – (war or hunting)
 - Subsistence must be obtainable on easy terms –to exempt such a big section from manual labor of production
- The leisure class exists very much in modern industrial society of America and Europe
- Habitual aversion to menial employments



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- Employments like warfare, politics, public worship and public merry making in popular apprehension differ intrinsically from labor that has to do with material means of life – producing to earn a living
 - In an industrial world things have changed from the barbarian society but the broad distinction still exists
 - Industrial – ultimate purpose is to utilize non-human things for man's comfort – crux of economy
 - Man's power over nature – frequent saying by economists
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Objects of activity and occupations

- For the barbarians – animate objects (formidable things which by virtue of real or imputed habit of initiating action) and inanimate objects (brute things that cannot act)
- Former comes under ‘Exploit’ and latter under ‘Industry’
- Exploit involves victory over enemies, storms, disease
- Industry is making a new thing by the hand from passive –brute material - diligence
- Exploit results in useful outcome, but captures animate object and is exciting – not drudgery

This distinction also applies to the sexes



Exploit versus drudgery

- The physical stature of the sexes and muscular growth may be affected by this division of labor
 - Hunting and pursuit of large game versus the daily chore
 - The aggressive assertion of force and sagacity of the men versus the persevering hard work and uneventful shaping of materials
 - Exploit is honorable, worthy and noble – involves agility and ferocity
 - Other occupations imply subservience, submission and unworthy
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Cultural codes

- As this tradition becomes consistent, in this cultural stage of society – it becomes a rule of conduct
- No employment or acquisition is morally acceptable to the self respecting man in this stage except on the basis of prowess – force or fraud
- Predatory habit of life settled on the group for long



Workmanship and production


- Human beings agents - act to accomplish some concrete impersonal end – taste for effective work and distaste for futile work or incapacity - sense of merit of serviceability and efficiency
- This is workmanship – industry
- Seeks visible success as rewards



Product vs booty

- When society changes from peaceable communities to predatory phase - Aggression and self assertion accepted
- Useful articles are obtained by seizure or compulsion – getting things by labor acquires irksomeness and indignity
- Too much emphasis on honor and prestige
- Arms and weapons are honorable in such a society
- Killing of formidable competitors – act of honour



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- Combat always existed
 - The point is acquiring a bellicose frame of mind – judging facts and events from the point of view of the fight
 - The difference between predatory and peaceable phase of culture is spiritual not mechanical.
 - When industrial methods are not developed to a degree of efficiency – predatory exploits for conquest of resources becomes necessary
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Chap 2 Pecuniary emulation

- Property ownership and leisure class are two different institutions but they emerged together in the early stage
- former based on ownership and latter based on consumption
- Early communes no ownership of women
- Ownership of women and property ownership related
- Able bodied men can take women by coercion – marriage as ownership – predatory forms of society
- Division between men's and women's work is maintained



Ownership

- Whenever system of private property is found, economic process involves struggle among men for possession of goods
- As industrial activity displaces predatory activity in the community's everyday life, accumulated property replaces exploits in men's habit
- Eg rich men today do not display tiger heads and skins
- Trophies of predatory exploit are replaced by industrial aggression and display of wealth
- In industrial society, wealth becomes honorable in itself



Consumption pecuniary emulation

- The economic goal of acquisition is accumulation is said to be consumption
 - Is consumption meant to satisfy consumer's physical wants?
 - Not necessarily
 - The motive for consumption is emulation – social standing
 - Even the labouring classes start consuming not just for subsistence at a certain stage
 - The wealthy do not consume for want or needs of subsistence
 - Why then economists are relating consumption to needs?
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Industry and commerce

- Every society seeks to satisfy its needs for comfort and security
- But under a regime individual ownership – visible signs of acquisition tends to shape society more than the instinct of workmanship or production
- In his later chapters Veblen distinguished between industry and business in modern society
- The friction between them was a central problem for him
- Fundamental contradiction between the human predisposition for useful production and societal institutions that waste products



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- Business – owners and leaders – primary goal is profit of their companies
 - In order to keep profits high they seek to limit or direct production and skills
 - They also put barriers on the industrial system
 - Business affects society adversely
 - According to Veblen, society should be led by engineers – having social welfare in mind
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