

Conspicuous leisure

Veblen

Three characteristics of leisure classes in semi feudal society

- Ownership of property
- Abstain from industrial work on brute matter for daily living and engage in display of prowess, excellence and aesthetic skills
- Conspicuous consumption – public display of wealth



Ownership

- The institution of ownership of property has begun with the ownership of persons – primarily women
- See for eg., Frederich Engels, ‘The origin of family, private property and the state.’

- The purpose:
 - The tendency for domination and coercion
 - The utility of these persons as proof of the owners’ greatness
 - The actual utility of the services provided by these persons

- Wife capturing from enemy tribes was found in early societies



Industriousness


- Normally one would expect that struggle for wealth should lead men to be industrious and frugal
- This happens in lower classes in sedentary community whose ordinary means of acquiring goods is productive labor
- They cannot avoid labor and it does not hold derogatory value for them
- In fact they take emulative pride for productive efficiency in the work
- Thrift and efficient



Leisure classes: earn trophies

- Thrift and diligence are also present in wealthier classes
- But it is overshadowed by **secondary demands** of pecuniary emulation
- The secondary demand is abstention from productive work
- The lasting proof of productive and industrious labor is its material product to be used.
- The concrete result of an exploit is a booty, trophy or something that can be exhibited.



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- In later societies, ranks, badges titles and other insignia are exhibited – for **example, the Army**
 - From the economic point of view, the engagements of the leisure class as employment is similar to what Veblen refers to as *exploit* found in early predatory forms of society
 - They are decorous in nature
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Effort, training in decorum

- A lot of effort goes into these accomplishments of leisure
- But they clearly indicate expenditure of unproductive time, i.e., time not spent in securing the immediate necessities of life
- Beyond branches of learning and aesthetic faculty, leisure classes spend considerable time cultivating physical habits and dexterity
- Such things as proper manners, decorum and polite forms of behavior and ceremonial observances
- These behavioral habits of the leisure class indicate that the time spent in private life was also worthily spent in acquiring accomplishments that have no monetary value



Manners

- Codes of conduct between mastery and subservience are stringently enforced in predatory societies.
 - Some of them have survived in the Continent in the form of intrinsic worth of certain habits of good manners and proper decorum
 - Many aristocratic gentlemen regret the vulgarization of life among the industrial classes

 - Manners have presently come to be of substantial utility for themselves shorn of their original context and purpose
 - They acquire a sacramental character independent of the facts under which they originated
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Consumption that is ceremonial or rituals

- The utilities consumed by civilized men may be necessary for decent life and personal comfort but are often ceremonial
- The discomfort caused by the absence of these utilities is not so much physical discomfort
- The labor spent of these ceremonial services in the household are classed by Veblen as leisure
- Unproductive consumption of food, rare articles of adornment are a taboo for the under class completely



Conspicuous consumption

- Conspicuous consumption becomes honorable in itself – mark of achievement or dignity – consumption of more valuable things
 - This distinction is found in consumption of intoxicating beverages and narcotics as well
 - As wealth accumulates – need to demonstrate to friends, rivals and competitors
 - Feasts and gifts that were part of the social support now become lavish display
 - Indulgence in costly entertainments
 - Women had to practice more restraint in these matters – patriarchy
 - Women seen as chattel should consume only what is necessary to her sustenance
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Vicarious consumption

- The leisure of the master is an indulgence of the tendency to avoid labor, it enhances the master's wellbeing
- The leisure of the servant class is a performance they are made to do, not primarily directed at their own comfort
- They do it to improve the status of the master
- Not sure if their well-being improves
- They can perform leisure only without violating the rules of hierarchy – 'trained conformity'
- This is also true of the wives – 'effectual conspicuous subservience'



Vicarious consumption

- Lower strata and industrious groups may on occasions engage in conspicuous consumption but it is vicarious and not sustained
- Vicarious – living and acting like someone else

Eg., Celebration, of lifecycle events

- Marriages in India
- Celebrity/cine stars/sport stars lifestyle




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- So there is a leisure class, a vicarious leisure class consisting of servants and a working class
 - The servant classes are different from the working classes as they may undertake vicarious consumption of goods



Conspicuous consumption in industrial society

- In modern industrial communities, gadgets and mechanical devices have replaced domestic servants
- Hired services may be used by households
- Households have become corporate unit in which the housewife has more equality
- Vicarious leisure accordingly may disappear



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- But there will still be some unproductive labor required to keep up the reputability of the middle- class household –this will be vicarious leisure
 - Now it is performed for the quasi-personal corporate household not for the patriarch of yesteryears
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- Early industrial society only the richest could engage in conspicuous consumption
 - Costly entertainments, clubs, parties and feasts – to maintain social circle
 - The gentlemen of leisure is a connoisseur, consumed only for the sake of consumption
 - Wore distinct apparel
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- In the later industrial stage with wage labor and **petty household economy** these things are no longer the preserve of the aristocracy
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Family in an industrial society


- When servitude disappears the vicarious consumers attached to a gentlemen of older society comes down.
- The housewife becomes the vicarious consumer of the nuclear family in industrial society
- This is seen in the middle-and lower middle classes in Western culture
- In these classes the head of the household the worker has to earn and is industrious
- But he retains his status by deputing the leisure habits to his wife who will remain at home



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- This is a curious inversion according to Veblen
 - The economic circumstances make the head to gain a livelihood by productive labor
 - Man applies himself to work and his wife duly performs vicarious leisure
 - She may not be idle but can indulge in things that clearly do not fall under gainful labor
 - Consider the withdrawal of women from the workforce in the lower middle classes in India that have seen income increases – WFP of women in India has declined
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- The vicarious consumption of middle –class households is not strictly a leisure class lifestyle
 - They cannot afford it – but it is there with secondary importance – some member of the household will do it to maintain the repute of the family

 - In highly organized industrial community – reputation depends on wealth and income and the means of showing it to the world
 - Both conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption are characterized by the common factor of the amount of waste of time they involve
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Rural and urban consumption

- The anonymity of industrial society makes demonstration of ability to pay
- Veblen thinks that this is more the case in urban than rural society
- In the city consumption is a component of the standard of living that has to be shown
- In the village gossip and close ties performs this function of showing off the savings available to the family



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- The urban artisanal classes save less; they have the habit of treating others for a smoke or drink
 - In earlier societies conspicuous leisure was a mark of status
 - In industrial society, conspicuous consumption is a mark of achievement



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- The instinct of workmanship is present in all men.
 - It is antithetical to engaging in things that are futile
 - Industrial society through wage labor and cash payments has brought workmanship more effectively into play
 - But the propensity for conspicuous leisure continues to manifest itself in social duties, quasi- artistic and quasi-scholarly accomplishments, decoration of the house, and so on



Personality development

- Though purposeless leisure is deprecated in industrial society, intricate polite observances continue
- Organizations are found with the objective of individual development by talking and discussion
- No effective economic value but make-believe of purposeful employment
- The idea of waste as something bad arises from the instinct of workmanship
- For the conspicuous consumer it does not seem as waste
- Whether carpets tapestries, silver linings, jewelry and dress are indispensable?



Impersonal decisions

- These things are consumed for personal comfort and habit, – so is it relative?
- Veblen suggests that the test what is useful to enhance human life as a whole in an impersonal sense should not from the subjective desires of the consumer
- It should come from the spirit of workmanship,
- The instinct of workmanship is the final court of appeal in any question of economic truth and adequacy
- Aside from status, comparison, custom and habit, we need to ask whether tastes and consumption result in the fullness of life



Critique

- C Wright Mills says that Veblen accepted the American value for utility and industriousness and applied to criticize American realities
- But he used simple binaries and was a kind of generalist who used these classifications to explain everything
- He undervalued the significance of initiative, creativity and training – aesthetic and intellectual
- His understanding of what he refers to as leisure activities- religion for instance, does not reflect historical study but general statements



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- Thinkers today deal with stratification and class with more complex theories
 - But the concept of conspicuous consumption remains relevant
 - As an exercise you might think of lifestyles of the wealthy in different fields, not just business – cinema stars for instance in terms of what we discussed.
 - The vicarious classes attached to the cine industry may also be studied
 - You might also reflexively engage with your own lifestyle and consumption
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