

## Thorstein Veblen and American Social Criticism

Joseph Heath

Department of Philosophy

University of Toronto

Thorstein Veblen is perhaps best thought of as America's answer to Karl Marx. This is sometimes obscured by the rather unfortunate title of his most important work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which is misleading, insofar as it suggests that the book is just a theory of the "leisure class." What the book provides is in fact a perfectly general theory of class, not to mention property, economic development, and social evolution. It is, in other words, a system of theory that rivals Marx's historical materialism with respect to scope, generality and explanatory power. Furthermore, it is a system of theory whose central predictions, with respect to the development of capitalism and the possibilities for emancipatory social change, have proven to be essentially correct. When stacked up against Marx's prognostications, this success clearly provides the basis for what might best be described as an *invidious comparison*.

For example, it is Veblen who, at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, observed that "The exigencies of the modern industrial system frequently place individuals and households in juxtaposition between whom there is little contact in any other sense than that of juxtaposition. One's neighbors, mechanically speaking, often are socially not one's neighbors, or even acquaintances; and still their transient good opinion has a high degree of utility... It is evident, therefore, that the present trend of the development is in the direction of heightening the utility of conspicuous consumption as compared with leisure" (1899, ch. 4). One could search long and hard to find a single paragraph in Marx's work that is as prescient, or that reveals a more profound grasp of the underlying dynamics of the capitalist system.

Apart from the merits of his general analysis of social class, Veblen also pioneered a style of critical theory, in many ways distinctively American, but in any case quite different from the European

traditions that went on to dominate 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history. Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud became, via the Frankfurt School, the most influential figures in the European stream of critical theory. Veblen, by contrast, initiated a more theoretically parsimonious style of social criticism, which remained a powerful force throughout the same period, and yet was seldom identified as part of a cohesive movement or school of thought. One can see the influence clearly though, in subsequent works of American social criticism ranging from Jane Jacobs' *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) to Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997).

Although Veblen was not himself a pragmatist, he took two of the central ideas that helped shape the pragmatist ethos in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the importance of instrumental action and the evolutionary adaption of social institutions – and showed how they could be developed into a critical theory of society. Veblen's precise relationship with pragmatism has been the subject of considerable debate (Ayres, 1961, 27ff; McFarland 1985; Tilman 1996, 109-141). He studied philosophy at Carlton College (B.A. 1880), Johns Hopkins, and Yale (Ph.D. 1884). After seven years of unemployment, he returned to study economics at Cornell, where he simply showed up one day, "wearing a coonskin cap and corduroy trousers" (Dorfman 1966, 80) and talked his way in. Before graduating, he received a faculty appointment at the University of Chicago, and went on to teach at Stanford University, the University of Missouri, and finally the New School for Social Research. Although he studied briefly with Charles Sanders Peirce at Johns Hopkins, and interacted with John Dewey and George Herbert Mead as colleagues, he always maintained an arms-length relationship to pragmatism. (Indeed, the emphasis that he placed over the years on "idle curiosity" was intended precisely to distance himself from the pragmatist insistence that all knowledge be practical.) His dominant intellectual influences could perhaps best be described as a blend of Herbert Spencer and Edward Bellamy. Nevertheless, his work was sufficiently imbued with the pragmatist ethos that Europeans, including various members of the Frankfurt School, had difficulty seeing the difference (Adorno, 1941; Tilman 1992, 191). This made his work relatively easy to dismiss, on the grounds that

the “scientism” of the pragmatist perspective (such as the preference for Darwinian over “dialectical” methods) deprived it of the potential for radical insight. Yet in retrospect, it seems clear that many of these critics were simply appalled at how many of their own “leisure class” habits Veblen’s critique unmasked. (His classification of “high culture” as merely another form of conspicuous consumption was a particular sticking-point with Theodor Adorno, who described Veblen’s attitude in this regard as “splenetic,” “misanthropic,” and “melancholy” [1941, 393 & 407]).

In this paper, my goal is to identify and explain some of the characteristic features of the style of social criticism that Veblen pioneered. In order to do so, I must first set aside several of the misconceptions that have arisen about his work. The first concerns its generality, as I have already suggested. Veblen must not be understood merely as a critic of an obsolete “aristocratic” pattern of upper-class consumption, but rather as the progenitor of a general theory of the relationship between class, status, private property, and social inequality. The second major misunderstanding of Veblen’s work arises from the assumption that he is engaged in *moralizing* social criticism. On the contrary, Veblen shared with both Marx and Freud the desire to refrain from making simple value judgments. Yet at the same time, he sought to avoid the pitfall that both Marx and Freud fell into, viz. relying upon elaborate theoretical constructions in lieu of moral claims (a strategy that violates one of the most fundamental rules of argument, viz. that one cannot derive plausible conclusions – e.g. workers are badly treated, people are sexually repressed – from anything that is intrinsically less plausible – e.g. Hegelian dialectics, the struggle of Eros and Thanatos). Veblen, by contrast, attempts to ground his critical theory in a set of minimal or platitudinous normative claims. In particular, he presents the first clear-cut instance of a theorist using the diagnosis of an unsuspected collective action problem as a strategy of social and cultural criticism.

## I

Status is the central concept in Veblen’s analytical framework. Status is, in his view, more

fundamental than class, private property, or any other economic concept. Indeed, a proper understanding of status is essential to understanding any of the routine assumptions made by economists, such as the “irksomeness” of labor and the desirability of leisure (Veblen, 1898). Veblen conceives of status among humans as a stratification system, no different in principle from the hierarchies that structure social relations throughout the animal kingdom (from the “pecking order” among chickens to the dominance relations among our closest primate ancestors). It is grounded in judgments that establish an *invidious comparison*, which Veblen defines as a “comparison of persons with a view to rating and grading them in respect of relative worth or value” (1899, 34).

Human action, in Veblen’s view, is governed by two fundamental instincts or “proclivities.” The first is the “instinct of workmanship,” which he regards as a fairly direct outgrowth of the instrumentality, or the “teleological” character of human action. Because our actions are always aimed at some objective, we acquire “a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity”(1899, 15). In other words, thanks to the generic structure of instrumental rationality, which is concerned with finding the most appropriate means to the realization of our ends, we come to value that which is useful and effective, and to disparage that which is useless or wasteful. The second fundamental instinct is the “predatory proclivity,” which expresses itself in the form of fighting, “practices of exploit,” and dominance in social relations (Tool 1998, 309).

The exercise of each of these proclivities serves as a basis for invidious comparison among persons, and thus the emergence of status hierarchy. Workmanship can be judged with respect to degrees of skill, and predation with respect to degrees of “prowess.” Thus even in a hunter-gatherer society with no explicit class differentiation, everyone knows who the most skilled hunter is, and honors him accordingly. However, there is an asymmetry between the workmanly and the predatory proclivities. The latter can be turned against fellow human beings, which then serves as the basis for a new invidious comparison, that between dominator and dominated. It is through this mechanism that the status hierarchy acquires the characteristics of a dominance hierarchy. This transition to a

“predatory culture” marks a change “from a struggle of the group against a non-human environment to a struggle against a human environment”(1899, 220).

The first consequence of this inward turn to emerge is the gendered division of labor. Since economic returns are sufficiently close to the subsistence minimum in the early stages of human social evolution, it is impossible for an entire class to sustain itself through predation alone (except externally, through “raiding” and warfare). Thus men and women both work, yet male effort is reserved for domains of activity that involve some element of “exploit” (and thus “cannot without derogation be compared with the uneventful diligence of the women” [1899, 5]). The concept of “property,” extending beyond mere personal possession, emerges also during this stage, modeled on the relationship of domination toward women. Ownership begins with the domination of women (what we would now call “mate-guarding behavior”), and is subsequently extended to encompass physical objects. It is therefore, first and foremost, a system of rank. “Ownership began and grew into a human institution on grounds unrelated to the subsistence minimum. The dominant incentive was from the outset the invidious distinction attaching to wealth”(1899, 26).

When the size of the economic surplus becomes sufficiently great as to permit stable relations of exploitation, the stage is set for the emergence of an explicit class society. The predatory character of the upper class is reflected in the fact that it is not only exempt from any “industrial” employment, but is positively barred from it. This produces a sort of transvaluation of values, in which the useless becomes celebrated, precisely because it serves as sign that one is a member of the dominant class – hence the social significance of leisure. Of course, the instinct of workmanship is never entirely extinguished. Once the predatory class is sufficiently entrenched, fewer opportunities present themselves for displays of prowess. Thus this class invents for itself new, labor-intensive activities, which may involve great effort and skill, but which are demarcated from the activities of the laboring classes by virtue of being explicitly futile in their aim. Sport is the most obvious example, but more controversially, Veblen also includes under this rubric religious observances, etiquette, esoteric

learning (such as classical languages), aesthetic appreciation, “domestic music,” and a variety of other activities (1899, 45). Hence the perverse spectacle of the best (if not necessarily the brightest) applying themselves with boundless energy and selfless commitment, developing advanced competencies in activities that have absolutely no redeeming social value. The term “leisure class” is, in this respect, somewhat misleading, since members of this class often find their lives to be just as hectic and demanding as those of the laboring classes. This is why Veblen describes leisure, not as mere “indolence,” but as a “performance”(1899, 58). (For example, he observes that, “good breeding requires time, application and expense”[1899, 49]).

There is considerable fodder here for social criticism, and Veblen might easily have used this analysis as the basis for a moralizing critique of the class structure of the society in which he lived. Yet he chose to keep his powder dry. In order to see this, however, it is essential to distinguish the *satirical* from the *critical* elements of Veblen’s work. When he suggests that members of the “hereditary leisure class” are rivaled only by “lower-class delinquents” in their retention of barbarian traits and a “bellicose frame of mind”(1899, 247), it is difficult to interpret this as anything other than criticism. Or consider his “explanation” for the relatively high social status accorded to lawyers (despite the fact that they are usually propertyless):

The profession of law does not imply large ownership; but since no taint of usefulness, for other than the competitive purpose, attaches to the lawyer’s trade, it grades high in the conventional scheme. The lawyer is exclusively occupied with the details of predatory fraud, either in achieving or in checkmating chicane, and success in the profession is therefore accepted as marking a large endowment of that barbarian astuteness which has always commanded men’s respect and fear (1899, 231).

Given that the book is replete with such passages, many readers have been inclined to dismiss Veblen's assurances that he is not engaged in any sort of condemnation (Dorfman 1966, 192). (Similarly, when Marx writes that “capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor,”[1867, 342] it speaks against his claim that “exploitation” is a purely technical concept, and that he is not engaged in a moralizing critique of capitalism.) Indeed, it is easy to read such high-minded assurances as just another satirical aspect of the work, mimicking the way that conventional economists adopted the mantle of “positive” social science, while peddling works that consisted of little more than thinly veiled right-wing ideology. (After all, those who are scandalized by any deviation from the ideal of “value neutral” social-scientific inquiry tend to react, not to the presence of value judgments *per se*, but rather to the occurrence of value judgments with which they disagree.)

In Veblen's case, however, the claim is slightly more credible than it is with Marx. This is for two reasons. First, there is the fact that whatever intuitive abhorrence we may feel for the excesses of the predatory class is, according to Veblen's own analysis, merely an expression of the “instinct of workmanship” acting in our own person. This immediately relativizes the judgment, and deprives it of some force. Who is to say that one instinct is better than the other? As Veblen is at pains to point out, the sort of temperament induced by the instinct of workmanship is considered just as contemptible by those with a greater endowment of the predatory proclivities, and they have chosen their activities with the specific intention of distancing themselves from it. For example, members of the predatory class don't work, not because they are lazy, but because of a moral revulsion that they experience at the very thought of gainful employment, or any other activity afflicted by a “taint of usefulness.” Thus Veblen's own analytical framework has a tendency to undercut whatever normative grounds there may be for straightforward moral criticism of the leisure class. The problem of “the standpoint of the critic,” which preoccupied critical theorists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, arises here with considerable force.

The second reason to take seriously Veblen's protestations of neutrality is that his work does contain a second strain of explicitly critical reflections, which he is more forthright in acknowledging.

In particular, Veblen develops a critique of two features of the leisure class, viz. its “wastefulness” and its “conservatism,” based upon normative foundations that are *not* merely the expression of some instinctual reactions. On these particular points, he tries to develop what we might refer to, anachronistically, as a “freestanding” normative basis for critique. These arguments are distinguished by the fact that they are far more formal in structure, and employ a conceptual apparatus that goes on to be developed and refined in later work. This suggests that Veblen intended these two lines of critique to be taken much more seriously than the sarcastic asides and *bon mots* that set the overall tone of the work.

## II

Reading through *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, it is clear that Veblen disapproved of many things. He disapproved of duels (a “barbarian recrudescence”), sports (“serviceable evidence of an unproductive expenditure of time”), manners (“the voucher of a life of leisure”), dogs (“the filthiest of the domestic animals”), corsets (“crucifixion of the flesh”), churches (“the priestly vicarious leisure class”), captains of industry (“quasi-predatory careers of fraud”), cap and gown in academia (“atavistic conformity”), and so on. Yet beyond mere disapproval, there are also some things that he *criticized*. The primary difference is that, in cases where he criticized, he also provided an explicit articulation of the normative basis for his claims.

Consider the case of waste – or to be more specific, the particular sort of waste generated by conspicuous consumption. Veblen's criticism here is relatively simple. Some goods are valued and consumed for their intrinsic properties. Thus the “advance of industrial efficiency” leads to improvements in the quality and comfort of life. Yet property is accumulated, not just to satisfy our basic physical needs, but also for its honorific qualities. It serves as a basis for invidious comparison, not just with respect to quantity, but also quality. This sort of accumulation is collectively self-defeating, for the simple reason that not everyone can be above average. The result is that, regardless of

how much the standard of living rises, “the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot”(1899, 31).

One way of articulating the problem is to say that status (along with all of its derivative concepts, such as self-respect, esteem, honor, and merit) is essentially an ordinal ranking system, and thus the quest for status is a zero-sum game.

In the nature of the case, the desire for wealth can scarcely be satiated in any individual instance, and evidently a satiation of the average or general desire for wealth is out of the question. However widely, or equally, or “fairly,” it may be distributed, no general increase of the community's wealth can make any approach to satiating this need, the ground of which is the desire of every one to excel every one else in the accumulation of goods. If, as is sometimes assumed, the incentive to accumulation were the want of subsistence or of physical comfort, then the aggregate economic wants of a community might conceivably be satisfied at some point in the advance of industrial efficiency; but since the struggle is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of an invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible (1899, 32).

Because status is zero-sum, the production and consumption of status goods is negative-sum, since effort and resources are channeled toward applications where they do not generate “an enhancement of life and well-being on the whole”(1899, 97). It is because these economic activities have a real cost, yet fail to produce any benefit, that they can be referred to as “wasteful.” Veblen is clear, however, that this description is not intended to impugn the motives of individuals who engage in consumption governed by “the canon of conspicuous waste.” From the “standpoint of the individual consumer” it is not wasteful. “Whatever form of expenditure the consumer chooses, or whatever end he

seeks in making his choice, has utility to him by virtue of his preference”(1899, 98). Thus the use of the term waste “implies no deprecation of the motives or of the ends sought by the consumer”(1899, 98). The problem is that, because of the collective action problem induced by conspicuous consumption, this gain in utility is ephemeral. It is undone the moment a “fresh increase in wealth” gives rise to “a new standard of sufficiency” and “a new pecuniary classification of one’s self”(1899, 31). Thus the outcome of competitive consumption is unsatisfactory, not according to some “external” standard imposed by the critic, but according to the preferences of the consumers themselves. It is for this reason that waste of this sort fails to satisfy what Veblen calls “the economic conscience”(1899, 98).

There is of course an influential line of thinking, descended from antiquity, that emphasizes the insatiability of human desire. This was based upon a commonly observed psychological tendency, through which the satisfaction of one desire gives rise to several more. The significance of Veblen’s analysis lay in his redirection of our attention away from the psychological toward the social, and away from the mental state toward the object of desire. From this perspective, it is natural to expect that the rate of growth of “the pecuniary standard of decency” would be a function of the rate of growth of the economy. This was not at all obvious at the time. Joseph Schumpeter, for instance, as late as 1942 predicted that further economic growth would make “provision for the unemployed... not only a tolerable but a light burden”(1942, 69). He was of course aware that what we conceive of as poverty has a tendency to ratchet up over time. He simply assumed that the two rates of growth would be independent – such that the increase in “total output” could outstrip the growth of expectations. People would literally become swamped with goods. Under such conditions, it would be difficult to imagine the persistence of “chronic dissatisfaction” of the sort that Veblen predicted.

Veblen, on the other hand, argued that “the need of conspicuous waste.. stands ready to absorb any increase in the community’s industrial efficiency or output of goods, after the most elementary physical wants have been provided for”(1899, 110). This sounds like hyperbole. However, the widely reported finding that economic growth produces no measurable increase in average happiness after the

“plateau” of US\$10,000 GDP per capita has been reached (while there remains a weak but consistent correlation between *relative* wealth and individual happiness), appears to have borne out Veblen’s assessment (Stutzer and Frey, 2001). In part, the failure to appreciate the plausibility of Veblen’s claim stems from a tendency to adopt an unnecessarily narrow interpretation of the sort of preference structures that lead to competitive consumption. This has something to do with Veblen’s order of exposition, since his discussion of “chronic dissatisfaction” makes reference only to the competitive accumulation of wealth. Thus it is sometimes thought that “conspicuous waste” arises only when individuals use consumption as a way of displaying their wealth. Harvey Leibenstein (1950), for instance, introduced the term “Veblen effect” to describe cases in which the preference for a good increases as the price increases. (This is similar, but not identical, to a Giffen good, in which the quantity demanded increases as a function of price. The Veblen effect involves a shift in the demand curve, while the Giffen good is merely one with an upwardly sloping demand curve.) Yet Veblen was quite clear that the sort of preferences that motivate competitive consumption depend only in an indirect way upon the costliness of these items. It is the “canons of taste” and “decency” that determine preference. Price is relevant only insofar as it influences these standards. With respect to clothing, for instance, he claims that “This spiritual need of dress is not wholly, nor even chiefly, a naïve propensity for display of expenditure. The law of conspicuous waste guides consumption in apparel, as in other things, chiefly at the second remove, by shaping the canons of taste and decency”(1899, 168).

Veblen considers the status hierarchy, as a system of invidious comparison, to be more fundamental than other major categories of contrastive judgment, such as aesthetic taste or the moral sense. For example, “the superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful products is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty”(1899, 128). This is because “our higher appreciation of the superior article is an appreciation of its superior honorific character,” not its brute aesthetic qualities, and its honorific character arises from the way its consumptions “fits” into the background status

hierarchy. Veblen provides a variety of examples of this, such as the appreciation shown for flowers:

In this way it has happened, for instance, that some beautiful flowers pass conventionally for offensive weeds; others that can be cultivated with relative ease are accepted and admired by the lower middle class, who can afford no more expensive luxuries of this kind; but these varieties are rejected as vulgar by those people who are better able to pay for expensive flowers and who are educated to a higher schedule of pecuniary beauty in the florists' products; while still other flowers, of no greater intrinsic beauty than these, are cultivated at great cost and call out much admiration from flower-lovers whose tastes have been matured under the critical guidance of a polite environment (1899, 132).

Cheap flowers are not despised because they are cheap, but because they are ugly. The point is that they are perceived to be ugly because they are classified as ugly, and they are classified as ugly because they are cheap. (One can see this clearly in the case of goldenrod, which grows wild in North America, where it is therefore treated as a weed, but is imported to Europe, where it is prized by gardeners.) This phenomenon also underlies what Pierre Bourdieu describes as "the miracle of the unequal class distribution of the capacity for inspired encounters with works of art and high culture in general" (1984, p. 29). The important point is that there may be nothing competitive, envious, or even ostentatious about the individual consumer's preferences. Consumers, in Veblen's view, need not be preoccupied with status. The mere fact that they are attracted to the "beauty" or "style" of an object can be enough to generate competitive consumption, because "the canon of taste under which the designer works is a canon formed under the surveillance of the law of conspicuous waste, and... this law acts selectively to eliminate any canon of taste that does not conform to its demands" (1899 164).

Far too many of Veblen's readers come away from the book convinced that they are exempt

from the habits of conspicuous waste, because their everyday consumption habits are not informed by any desire to put on a display of wealth (or to demonstrate “pecuniary strength”). This represents a singular failure to appreciate the force of Veblen’s argument. Consider, for instance, the contemporary countercultural style that David Brooks (2000) refers to as “one-downmanship.” The imperative is something like this:

Cultivated people are repelled by the idea of keeping up with the Joneses. Nothing is more disreputable than competing with your neighbors by trying to more effectively mimic the style of the social class just above you. Instead, as members of the educated class, you reject status symbols in order to raise your status with your equally cultivated peers. Everything about you must be slightly more casual than your neighbor. Your furnishings must be slightly more peasanty. Your lives should have a greater patina of simplicity. So your dinnerware will not have the sort of regal designs they use at Buckingham Palace. It will be basic white, like what they sell at Pottery Barn. Your shoes won’t be snazzy pumps; they’ll be simple but expensive penny loafers from Prada. Ostentation is a disgrace, but anything unadorned is a sign of refreshing honesty (2000, 93-94).

This pattern of “anti-consumerist” consumption is just as powerfully motivated by the concern for invidious distinction, and therefore has the same collectively self-defeating character as any other form of competitive consumption (Heath, 2001). Yet perversely, Brooks takes these observations as evidence that “the Thorstein Veblen era is over” (Brooks 2001, 84; see also Schor 1998, 8). There has of course been an inversion of the value schema since Veblen’s time – partly as a consequence of Veblen’s own work – so that the canons of taste now place an exaggerated emphasis upon usefulness, rather than uselessness (hence the popularity of restaurant-grade stainless steel stoves in homes, or the vogue for using trucks as passenger vehicles). Yet the fact that these items are potentially useful does

not mean that they are actually put to good use. Thus the level of “conspicuous waste” involved in their production and consumption has not been affected at all by the transition from “bourgeois” to “bohemian” values. Indeed, it is precisely because it is independent of any particular system of values that the logical structure of Veblen’s analysis and the force of his critique remain valid (indeed, they provide the key to understanding the underlying dynamic of these changing patterns of consumption).

### III

The second major charge that Veblen lays upon the doorstep of “the wealthier class” is that it is “conservative,” or more specifically, that it “comes to exert a retarding influence upon social development far in excess of that which the simple numerical strength of the class would assign it”(1899, 200). The analytical basis for this claim and the normative foundations for the implied criticism are supplied by Veblen’s theory of social evolution. Of course, the modern reader cannot help but approach any exercise in late 19<sup>th</sup> century social Darwinism with considerable trepidation. Nevertheless (and despite his rather anxiety-provoking speculations about the origins of the dolichoblond ‘race’ and Aryan culture), much of what Veblen says on the subject is perfectly reasonable, and can easily be reconstructed within a modern evolutionary framework.

Veblen was an early proponent of what is now referred to as a “dual inheritance” or a “gene-culture co-evolutionary” theory (Richerson and Boyd, 2004; Hodgson 1998, 188-9). Social action is subject to the influence of two distinct inheritance systems: the biological, which provides the individual with a set of *instincts*; and the cultural, which contributes a set of *habits* (Weed, 1981). The most significant sets of habits form *institutions*, which are “not only themselves the result of a selective and adaptive process,” but also “efficient factors of selection” insofar as they “make for a further selection of individuals endowed with the fittest temperament”(1899, 188). The inheritance system, in the case of institutions, is based upon the human propensity toward emulation, which Veblen regarded as absolutely fundamental. Simply put, people imitate one another, and as a result, habits or patterns of

action developed by individuals get passed down from generation to generation. Thus there is an inertial tendency in the cultural sphere (1899, 191).

More recent evolutionary theory has shown that these sorts of co-evolutionary models do not necessarily diverge from sociobiological models in any interesting way. It all depends upon how individuals choose the person that they intend to imitate. Most obviously, if children simply imitate their parents, then no pattern of behavior can emerge at the cultural level that could not also be sustained as a biological trait (since the cultural pattern will enjoy greater reproductive success only if it increases an individual's chances of becoming a parent, which is to say, if it enhances biological fitness). Perhaps more surprisingly, if individuals choose a role model through some random (or unbiased) sampling from the population, then culture will still evolve in lock-step with biology. It is only if there is some bias in the sampling procedure that the dynamics of the two inheritance systems can diverge in interesting ways.

Contemporary discussion has largely focused upon the suggestion, made by Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson, that cultural reproduction is subject to a "conformist" or a "frequency-dependent" bias, such that individuals choose to adopt the pattern of behavior exhibited by the majority of the population (Boyd and Richerson 2005, 31). This creates, among other things, "tipping point" effects that are far more dramatic in the cultural sphere than in the biological. Veblen's suggestion, on the other hand, is that imitation is biased by the status system. Individuals have a propensity to imitate those who are directly above them in the status hierarchy (hence the phenomenon of "pecuniary emulation.") Because of this, behavioral patterns and "spiritual attitudes" are propagated downward through the status hierarchy, giving the dominant class a wholly disproportionate influence upon the more general characteristics of the culture.

In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper

class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure to the lowest strata. The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal (1899, 84).

Thus what Marxists have been inclined to describe as the “hegemony” of the ruling class is not so much a consequence of straightforward domination as it is a product of this imitative “micromotive” generating a rather dramatic form of “macrobehavior” (Schelling 1978). Indeed, one of the reasons that Veblen’s work received such a guarded, if not hostile reception amongst socialists is that he claimed that *every* stratum of society was complicit in reproducing the class structure.

No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretense of pecuniary decency is put away. There is no class and no country that has yielded so abjectly before the pressure of physical want as to deny themselves all gratification of this higher or spiritual need (1899, 85).

There is an even more disquieting suggestion made here, viz. that status, like any other good, is subject to diminishing marginal returns, and it is therefore the *lower* classes who are more likely to make serious compromises in their standard of living in order to engage in competitive consumption. Our natural inclination is to think of conspicuous consumption as a vice that is most common among members of the upper class. We forget that because these individuals already have so much status, they are unlikely to make great sacrifices in order to achieve some small increment (Frank, 1985, 144). Hence the explosive suggestion that competitive consumption may in fact be a greater social problem

among the poor than among the rich.

More importantly, Veblen argues that the upper classes cannot be held responsible for the *structure* of the class system, since that structure is upheld and reproduced through a system of emulation that occurs at all levels of society. What they can be held responsible for is the specific *content* that gets propagated through this system of emulation – the habits and ideas that are promoted. It is here that its most pernicious influence is felt. The problem arises as a consequence of what Veblen describes as the “industrial exemption” of the upper classes.

Veblen views culture – and in particular, the prevailing set of economic institutions – as an adaptive system. This means that it changes over time in response to environmental pressures. Veblen regards “the industrial process” – by which he means something very similar to what Marx called “social labor” – as the primary point at which these environmental pressures are felt, and thus the domain in which adaptation occurs most readily. The problem is that those who are the most directly involved in the industrial process, and who are therefore most likely to abandon old habits when they become maladaptive, are at the bottom of the status hierarchy. As a result, the most useful exercises of what Boyd and Richerson call “guided variation” (2004, 116) occur in the class of society that is the *least* likely to exercise any influence upon others. Furthermore, the higher one goes up the status hierarchy, the more out of touch people become with the material constraints imposed by the environment. The class system serves as sort of internal buffer, within the culture, that insulates individuals from environmental pressures. This explains what Veblen calls “the conservation of archaic traits” among members of the upper classes. The problem is that these individuals are the *most* likely to be imitated. As a result, there will be a constant *lag* in the adaptation of the culture to its environment. Useful innovations will be ignored, while entrenched patterns of behavior will persist long after they have become maladaptive, simply because the most conservative class is also the most culturally influential.

In Veblen’s view, Marx was quite wrong to regard the “reactionary” nature of the upper classes

as a consequence of the threat posed to its material interests. It is, on the contrary, almost entirely “spiritual”:

The opposition of the [upper] class to changes in the cultural scheme is instinctive, and does not rest primarily on an interested calculation of material advantages; it is an instinctive revulsion at any departure from the accepted way of doing and of looking at things – a revulsion common to all men and only to be overcome by stress of circumstances. All change in habits of life and of thought is irksome. The difference in this respect between the wealthy and the common run of mankind lies not so much in the motive which prompts to conservatism as in the degree of exposure to the economic forces that urge a change (1899, 199).

Thus Veblen’s critique of upper class conservatism is not a moralizing critique. While he makes it clear that he disapproves of their “barbarian” habits, he uses this only as a basis for satire. His formal criticism is considerably more restrained. The problem with the institution of the leisure class is that it “acts to lower the industrial efficiency of the community and retard the adaptation of human nature to the exigencies of modern industrial life”(1899, 244). One might almost say that the leisure class “fetters” the development of the forces of production. Whether or not one thinks this is a good thing will, of course, depend substantially upon the position that one occupies in the status hierarchy, and one’s degree of exposure to leisure class values.

#### IV

One of the peculiar things about the rules governing status is that they must often remain tacit in order to be effective. This is why people react with such hostility to the *arriviste*. Newer members of a social class tend to be acting out, quite consciously, a script that older members of the class have long ago internalized – like an apprentice driver who needs to remind himself to shoulder-check every time

he changes lanes. The *arriviste* or the *nouveau riche* are often accused of vulgarity. Yet often the problem is not that they are doing anything *wrong*, it's that they are doing it all too *consciously*. This leaves more entrenched members of the class feeling exposed, because it reveals the artifice underlying what they prefer to regard as a purely natural form of behavior. (What Bourdieu calls "the ideology of natural taste" has correlates within all of these hierarchies: from "the ideology of good breeding" to "the ideology of natural cool.")

As a result, the conventions associated with any given status hierarchy often cannot survive explicit articulation, simply because this exposes the artificiality of the practice. Thus the most immediate impact of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* arose from the way that he, somewhat relentlessly, exposed these subterranean features of the status system to the harsh light of day. Veblen played an important role in undermining *the particular pattern of behavior* that was dominant among the upper classes at the time. But of course, this sort of critique does nothing to undermine the *structure* of the status system. It just forces people to find some new way of demarcating themselves from their social inferiors. It creates the need for a system of distinctions that can serve this function without being too obviously *intended* to serve this function.

Thus the pattern of conspicuous waste has changed, from conspicuous leisure to conspicuous consumption, as Veblen predicted, and now to what we might call "conspicuous authenticity." Brooks provides a nice example of this, in showing how the formal sitting room at the front of the home, reserved for entertaining guests, became unsustainable as soon as its artificiality became too obvious. As a result, it became customary in middle-class homes to invite guests into the kitchen upon arrival. This quickly led to an explosion of spending on kitchens, which are now easily the most expensive rooms in North American homes (featuring granite countertops, restaurant-grade appliances, furniture-style cabinetry, and kitchen cupboards with glass doors – like old-fashioned china cabinets). The underlying principle is that "spending on conspicuous display is evil, but it's egalitarian to spend money on parts of the house that would previously have been used by servants" (Brooks 2001, 89).

While the “canons” of conspicuous waste have changed, the “law” has not.

The fact that the content of our practices have changed over the past century proves to be an advantage, when it comes to interpreting Veblen’s work. For it allows us to distinguish with greater ease the logical structure of his critique from the volley of more specific cultural criticisms that he launched – precisely because the latter have become dated, while the former has not. I have tried to show that Veblen presents two “official” criticisms of the status system: first, that it generates collectively self-defeating patterns of consumption; and second, that it makes our social institutions maladaptive with respect to the environment. To the extent that these claims are justified, they are as valid today as they were at the time Veblen made them.

From a methodological standpoint, what is important about these two criticism is that they both reflect an attempt on Veblen’s part to steer clear of straightforwardly moralizing critique. His strategy was to start with normative claims that are, from a pragmatist perspective, platitudinous. The critical aspect of the theory then involves showing how these normative intuitions can be deployed in unobvious ways, via a more general social theory: we all condemn waste, we simply fail to realize how much of our economic activity is wasteful; we all support progress, yet we fail to appreciate the extent to which our social habits impede the adaptiveness of our institutions. Thus fairly radical social criticism emerge as a consequence of this analysis. In this respect, Veblen’s greatest work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, can be thought of as an attempt to leverage common sense – or at least, what the pragmatists thought of as common sense – into critical theory.

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