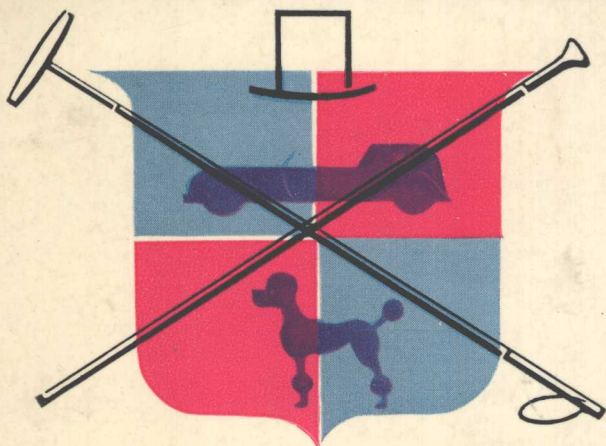


THORSTEIN VEBLEN'S
Famous Classic of Economic Thought

THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS



**The Challenging Analysis of Social
Conduct that Ironically Probes Misused
Wealth and Conspicuous Consumption.**

Introduction by C. Wright Mills

A Mentor Book

AN IRONIC LOOK AT OUR SOCIAL STANDARDS

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, his first and best-known work, Thorstein Veblen challenges some of man's most cherished standards of behavior and with devastating wit and satire exposes the hollowness of many of our canons of taste, education, dress and culture.

Veblen uses the leisure class as his example because it is this class that sets the standards followed by every level of society. The sign of membership in the leisure class is exemption from industrial toil and the mark of success is lavish expenditure—"conspicuous consumption" is the famous term he invented to describe spending which satisfies no real need but is a mark of prestige.

This process Veblen is criticizing continues today—the same worship of an empty scale of values, the same urge to prove oneself better than one's neighbor by the conspicuous accumulation of useless objects and by time- and money-wasting activities.

If we have not entirely changed our habits as a result of Veblen's teaching, nevertheless his influence on our economic thought has been incalculable.

In his stimulating introduction, C. Wright Mills, author of the provocative social study *White Collar*, revivifies a classic which should no longer be neglected, and gives it fresh and valid interest for today's readers. *Fortune Magazine* called Veblen "America's most brilliant and influential critic of modern business and the values of a business civilization." The *Minneapolis Tribune* said: "Every brash, upcoming generation should discover Veblen, and most complacent adults need to rediscover him."

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THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS

An Economic Study of Institutions

BY

THORSTEIN VEBLEN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
C. WRIGHT MILLS

A MENTOR BOOK

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Contents

INTRODUCTION TO THE MENTOR EDITION	vi
PREFACE	xx
1. <i>Introductory</i>	21
2. <i>Pecuniary Emulation</i>	33
3. <i>Conspicuous Leisure</i>	41
4. <i>Conspicuous Consumption</i>	60
5. <i>The Pecuniary Standard of Living</i>	80
6. <i>Pecuniary Canons of Taste</i>	87
7. <i>Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture</i>	118
8. <i>Industrial Exemption and Conservatism</i>	131
9. <i>The Conservation of Archaic Traits</i>	145
10. <i>Modern Survivals of Prowess</i>	164
11. <i>The Belief in Luck</i>	182
12. <i>Devout Observances</i>	192
13. <i>Survivals of the Non-Invidious Interest</i>	216
14. <i>The Higher Learning as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture</i>	235
INDEX	259

Introduction to the Mentor Edition

THORSTEIN VEBLEN is the best critic of America that America has produced. His language is part of the vocabulary of every literate American; his works are the most conspicuous contribution of any American to American studies; his style, which makes him the only comic writer among modern social scientists, is an established style of the society he dissected. Even the leisure class, which has now been reading Veblen for more than a generation, talks a little like him.

Veblen would have appreciated the fate his work has suffered. An unfashionable mind, he nevertheless established a fashion of thinking; a heretic, his points of view have been received into the canon of American social thought. Indeed, his perspectives are so fully accepted that one is tempted to say there is no other standard of criticism than the canon which Veblen himself established. All of which seems to prove that it is difficult to remain the critic of a society that is entertained by blame as well as praise.

Veblen is still read, not only because his criticism is still plausible, but because his style makes it so, even when the criticism is not taken seriously. Style is not exactly a strong point of American social science; in fact, most sociologists avoid style, even as some historians cultivate it. And, in this respect, Veblen is more historian than "social scientist." At any rate, it is his style that has kept this rather obscure and unsuccessful sociologist of the "Progressive Era"—he died in 1929—alive, after the immediate scene he anatomized has become history.

George Bernard Shaw, in his Preface to *Man and Superman*, remarks that ". . . he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him. Disprove his assertion after it is made, yet his style remains. Darwin no more destroyed the style of Job or Handel than Martin Luther destroyed the style of Giotto. All the assertions get disproved sooner or later; and so we find the world full of a magnificent debris of artistic fossils, with the matter-of-fact credibility gone clean out of them, but the form still splendid."

That is true of Veblen—although in his case we cannot say that all “the matter-of-fact credibility” in his works has “gone clean out of them.”

2

In a grim world, Veblen's style is so hilarious that one would wish to see it left intact as a going force for sanity. One may not always be sure of his meaning today, but his animus remains unmistakable and salutary. Whether or not his style in this, his first book, is his best, Veblen's books as a whole do constitute a work of art, as well as a full-scale commentary on American life.

As works of art, Veblen's books do what all art properly should do: they smash through the stereotyped world of our routine perception and feeling and impulse; they alert us to see and to feel and to move toward new images, many of them playful and bright and shrewd.

Veblen creates a coherent world in which each part is soon understandable and which is peopled by fascinating types of men and women who are soon though newly recognizable. We might learn from him that the object of all social study is to understand the types of men and women that are selected and shaped by a given society—and to judge them by explicit standards. Much of Veblen's comedy comes simply from his making his fresh standards explicit.

The form of Veblen's books and their content are one. It is as much the exact way he says things as what he says that one appreciates in his work. His phrases stick in the mind, and his insights, if acquired early, often make a difference in the quality of one's life. No, his thought could not properly be expressed in any other form than the form which he gave it. And that is why, like all works of art, you must “read” his work for yourself.

3

Thorstein Veblen realized that the world he lived in was dominated by what one might call “crackpot realism.” This was, and one must use the word, Veblen's metaphysic—his bone-deep view of the nature of everyday American reality. He believed that the very Men of Affairs whom everyone supposed to embody sober, hard-headed practicality were in fact utopian capitalists and monomaniacs; that the Men of Decision who led soldiers in war and who organized civilians' daily livelihoods in peace were in fact crackpots of the highest pe-

cuniary order. They had "sold" a believing world on themselves; and they had—hence the irony—to play the chief fanatics in their delusional world.

No mere joke, however, but a basic element of his perspective caused Veblen to write in 1922 what might with equal truth be written today: "The current situation in America is by way of being something of a psychiatric clinic. In order to come to an understanding of this situation there is doubtless much else to be taken into account, but the case of America is after all not fairly to be understood without making due allowance for a certain prevalent unbalance and derangement of mentality, presumably transient but sufficiently grave for the time being. Perhaps the commonest and plainest evidence of this unbalanced mentality is to be seen in a certain fearsome and feverish credulity with which a large proportion of the Americans are affected."

The realization of this false consciousness all around him, along with the sturdiness of mind and character to stand up against it, is the clue to Veblen's world outlook. How different his was from the prevailing view is suggested by his utter inability to be "the salesman."

4

We are told that even as a youth Veblen mumbled and so seemed incomprehensible. His students thought him dull, and he did not pretend to be fond of them. Veblen never got a decent academic job. He was not what the 19th century called a decent man. He was a sure-footed old man who hated sham, realistically and romantically protesting against it by his manner of living as well as by his life work. Veblen was one of those lean, masterless men, who are hated by plump flunkies. He was an idle, curious man, watching bustling citizens and pompous spokesmen beat him at games he refused to play.

It has been fashionable to sentimentalize Veblen as the most alienated of American intellectuals, as the Prince outside even the ghetto. But Veblen's virtue is not alienation; it is failure. Modern intellectuals have made a success of "alienation" but Veblen was a natural-born failure. To be conspicuously "alienated" was a kind of success he would have scorned most. In character and in career, in mind and in everyday life, he was the outsider, and his work the intellectual elaboration of a felt condition.

He was almost a foreigner, except if someone had told him, "If you don't like it here, go back where you came from," it would have had to be Wisconsin or Minnesota. He was born, in 1857, to Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin and he was

moved to Minnesota by his father, an artisan-farmer, when he was eight years old.

After nine more years on the farm he was packed off to Carleton, a small Congregational school in Northfield, Minnesota, where he was regarded as impressive but likely to be unsound. After graduating with the class of 1880, he tried to teach in a middlewestern academy. The next year he went to Johns Hopkins for graduate work and in 1884 he took his Ph.D. at Yale. No job was available for Thorstein Veblen. He went back to the farm. He married a girl from a family of university administrators. Still no job. For six or seven years he lived in idle curiosity. The farm had no place for a scholar, although on the Veblen farm scholarship was not out of place. Veblen talked much with his father and learned much from him.

In 1891, Veblen went to Cornell for further graduate work, and shortly thereafter finally got his first academic job at the University of Chicago. He lived eccentrically, and his wife kept going away and coming back again. Girls, we are told, liked Veblen, and he did not really object. He was requested to resign. With his wife again, he got a job at Stanford, where the Chicago story was more or less repeated. His wife now gone for good, Veblen began to teach at the University of Missouri, where he wrote four or five of his best books while living in the cellar of a colleague's house.

During World War I, Veblen went to Washington, filling a minor post in the Food Administration. He was not successful. After the Armistice, Veblen went to New York to write for an unsuccessful little magazine and to lecture at that future haven for refugee scholars, The New School for Social Research. He was not a successful lecturer. Then he went to Stanford and lived in a shack in the nearby woods, where he died on August 3, 1929.¹

There is no failure in American academic history quite so great as Veblen's. He was a masterless, recalcitrant man, and if we must group him somewhere in the American scene, it is with those most recalcitrant Americans, the Wobblies.² On the edges of the higher learning, Veblen tried to live like a Wobbly. It was a strange place for such an attempt. The Wobblies were not learned, but they were, like Veblen, masterless men, and the only non-middle class movement of revolt in twentieth-century America. With his acute discontent and shyness of program, Veblen was a sort of intellectual Wobbly.

¹ Joseph Dorfmann, in his *Thorstein Veblen and His America* (Viking, 1934), has written a detailed account of Veblen's life and work.

² The Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.): an industrial labor union, having a syndicalist ideology, founded in 1905.

Two schools of sociological study have flourished in America since Veblen's time. One of them makes a fetish of "Method," the other of "Theory." Both, accordingly, lose sight of their proper study.

The Higher Statisticians break down truth and falsity into such fine particles that we cannot tell the difference between them; by the costly rigor of their methods, they succeed in trivializing man and society, and in the process their own minds as well.

The Grand Theorists, on the other hand, represent a partially organized attempt to withdraw from the effort plainly to describe, explain, and understand human conduct and society: they verbalize in turgid prose the disordered contents of their reading of eminent nineteenth-century sociologists, and in the process mistake their own beginnings for a finished result.

In the practice of both these leading schools, contemporary Social Science becomes simply an elaborate method of insuring that no one learns too much about man and society, the first by formal but empty ingenuity; the second, by formal but cloudy obscurantism.

The work of Thorstein Veblen stands out as a live protest against these dominant tendencies of the higher ignorance. He always knew the difference between the trivial and the important, and he was wary of the academic traps of busy-work and pretension. While he was a man at thought, he kept the bright eye of his mind upon the object he was examining. Veblen was quite unable to be a specialist. He tried philosophy and he was trained as an economist, but he was also a sociologist and a psychologist. While specialists constructed a world to suit only themselves, Veblen was a professional anti-specialist. He was, in short, a social thinker in the grand tradition, for he tried to do what Hegel and Comte and Marx and Spencer and Weber—each in his own way—had tried to do:

To grasp the essentials of an entire society and epoch,
To delineate the characters of the typical men within it,
To determine its main drift.

The results of Veblen's attempt to do these things exist in some ten books. His first attempt, published in 1899, is the book you hold in your hand. Five years later he published *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, and then, in 1914, *The Instinct of Workmanship*. When World War I occurred, naturally Veblen turned to it, publishing *Imperial Germany* in

1915, and *The Nature of Peace* in 1917. After that, published a few years apart, he produced *The Higher Learning* and *The Vested Interests*; his more technical essays were collected in *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*. He wrote *The Engineers and The Price System*, published as a book in 1921, and *Absentee Ownership*—which many consider his best single volume—in 1923. After his death, *Essays in Our Changing Order* was published. These constitute the heritage Veblen left for the use of the human community. There is no better set of books written by a single individual about American society. There is no better inheritance available to those who can still choose their own ancestors.

6

Since the intelligentsia, just now, are in a conservative mood, no doubt during the nineteen-fifties Veblen, when he is not ignored, will be re-interpreted as a conservative. And, from one rather formal viewpoint, Veblen was a profoundly conservative critic of America: he wholeheartedly accepted one of the few un-ambiguous, all-American values: the value of efficiency, of utility, of pragmatic simplicity. His criticism of institutions and the personnel of American society was based without exception upon his belief that they did not adequately fulfill this American value. If he was, as I believe, a Socratic figure, he was in his own way as American as Socrates in his was Athenian.

As a critic, Veblen was effective precisely because he used the American value of efficiency to criticize American reality. He merely took this value seriously and used it with devastatingly systematic rigor. It was a strange perspective for an American critic in the nineteenth century as it would be in our own. One looked down from Mont St. Michel, like Henry Adams, or across from England, like Henry James. With Veblen perhaps the whole character of American social criticism shifted. The figure of the last-generation American faded and the figure of the first-generation American—the Norwegian immigrant's son, the New York Jew teaching English literature in a midwestern university, the southerner come north to crash New York—was installed as the genuine, if no longer 100 per cent American, critic.

If Veblen accepted utility as a master value, he rejected another all-American value: the heraldry of the greenback, the world of the fast buck. And since, in that strange institution, the modern corporation, the efficiency of the plain engineer and the pecuniary fanaticism of the business chieftain—

are intricately confused, Veblen devoted his life's work to clarifying the difference between these two types and between their social consequences.

7

The America Veblen saw seemed split in two. Running through everything Veblen wrote was the distinction between those activities and moods that are productive and useful and those that are ostentatious and honorific, workmanlike as against businesslike, industrial and amiable in contrast to pecuniary and predatory.

In the course of history, his account ran, material labor had become unworthy; predatory exploit had become the very essence of high dignity. Labor, Veblen believed, became irksome because of the indignity imputed to it; it had not become undignified because it was irksome. By "leisure" Veblen really meant everything that is not of the world of everyday, productive work and of the workmanlike habit of mind.

The key event in the modern history of the leisure class was its involvement with private ownership. Originally, Veblen tells us, predatory warlords seized property—especially the women—of an enemy, and hence their ownership of the booty revealed their prowess. This was of course honorific, because it was an assertion of superior force. In due course, the struggle for existence became a competition for pecuniary emulation: to own property was to possess honor; it was to set up an invidious distinction, a better-than-thou feeling on the part of absentee owners: those who own more than they could personally use, against those who did not own enough for their livelihood.

Popular esteem thus came to be based upon property, and accordingly became the basis for "that complacency which we call self-respect." For men judged themselves favorably or unfavorably in comparison to others of their general class in point of pecuniary strength, and this led to an insatiable, restless straining for invidious distinction.

But would not such a pecuniary struggle lead men to industrious and frugal lives? Perhaps for the lower classes, but not for the higher. Being useless in the struggle for status that had succeeded the struggle for existence, productive work was held to be unworthy. The better classes abstained from it while at the same time they emulated one another. It was not enough to possess wealth in order to win esteem; one had to put it into evidence; one had to impress one's importance upon others. Conspicuous leisure, according to Veblen, did just that—it put one's wealth and power on social display.

That was the value of leisure for this pecuniary society. When one's group was compact and all its members intimately known, either leisure or consumption served to demonstrate one's wealth. But when one moved among wider circles of urban strangers, it became necessary to advertise one's wealth. Conspicuous consumption was then needed as a means of ordinary decency. With what was obviously expensive and wasteful one could impress all transient and anonymous observers.

So mere idleness was not enough: it had to be the idleness of expensive discomfort, of noble vice, and costly entertainment. It had, in short, to be conspicuous consumption: the obvious waste of valuable goods as a means of gaining reputability.

Opposed to all this, there stand in Veblen's world the industrial interests of the modern community, and the honest, prosaic man who would serve these industrial interests. But such peaceable men, having a "non-emulative, non-invidious interest in men and things" lack what passes for initiative and ingenuity, and end up as amiable good-for-nothing fellows. For what is good for the community is, of course, in a regime of crackpot realism, "disserviceable to the individual."

By his master split, with businessmen on the pecuniary side, Veblen linked the theory of the leisure class with the theory of business enterprise. For ownership and acquisition belonged to the pecuniary range of employments, to the moneyed life. And the "captain of industry" was misnamed, for his was a pecuniary rather than an industrial captaincy.

This, all too briefly, is the kind of real, never-never world you who are to read this book for the first time are about to enter. "All this is incredible," Veblen suddenly remarks in the middle of one of his books, "but it is everyday fact." Veblen has made Alices of us all, and dropped us through the looking glass into the fantastic world of social reality.

What Veblen said remains strong with the truth, even though his facts do not cover the scenes and the characters that have emerged in our own time. He remains strong with the truth because we could not see the newer features of our own time had he not written what and as he did. Which is one meaning of the fact that his biases are the most fruitful that have appeared in the literature of American social protest. But all critics are mortal, and some parts of Veblen can no longer

live for us. In the criticisms of Veblen which follow, I shall examine only his theory of the leisure class.

9

Veblen's theory is not "The Theory of the Leisure Class." It is a theory of a particular element of the upper classes in one period of the history of one nation. It is a criticism of the *nouveau riche*, so much in evidence in Veblen's formative time, the America of the latter half of the nineteenth century, of the Vanderbilts, Goulds, and Harrimans, of Saratoga Springs and Newport, of the glitter and the gold.

Moreover, what he wrote about was mainly Local Society and its Last Resorts, and especially the women of these worlds. He could not of course have been expected in the eightennineties to see the meaning for the *national* status system of the professional celebrities, who have risen as part of the national media of mass communication and entertainment, nor the major change in national glamour, in which the debutante is replaced by the movie star, and the local society lady by the military and political and economic managers—the power elite—whom crackpot realists now celebrate as their proper chieftains.

10

The spleen of Veblen is due to the assumption, in his own words, that "the accumulation of wealth at the upper end of the pecuniary scale implies privation at the lower end of the scale." He tended always to assume that the pie was of a certain size, and that the wealthy class withdraws from the lower classes "as much as it may of the means of sustenance, and so reducing their consumption, and consequently their available energy, to such a point as to make them incapable of the effort required for the learning and adoption of new habits of thought." Again, the moral edge of the phrase, "conspicuous consumption" lies in the fact that it tends "to leave but a scanty subsistence minimum . . . to absorb any surplus energy which may be available after the pure physical necessities of life . . ." All this, strangely enough, was a sort of survival in Veblen's thought of classic economic conceptions of scarcity, and betrays a lack of confidence in technological abundance which we cannot now accept in the simple terms in which Veblen left it.

Veblen, thinking of the immigrant masses of his time and

of the enormously unequal distribution of income and wealth, did not leave enough scope for the economic pie to expand—and what has happened, especially since the second World War, has meant that the majority of the U. S. population can consume conspicuously. In fact, in the absence of “lower classes on a scanty subsistence,” the term “conspicuous consumption” becomes a somewhat flat description of higher standards of living because the invidious element is lacking. Of course the æsthetics of Veblen’s case remain applicable.

11

In depicting the higher style of life, Veblen seemed to confuse aristocratic and bourgeois traits. Perhaps this is a limitation of his American viewpoint. He did this explicitly at one or two points: “The aristocratic and the bourgeois virtues—that is to say the destructive and pecuniary traits—should be found chiefly among the upper classes . . .” One has only to examine the taste of the small shopkeeper to know that this is certainly not true.

Conspicuous consumption, as Veblen knew, is not confined to the upper classes. But today I should say that it prevails *especially* among one element of the new upper classes—the *nouveau riche* of the new corporate privileges—the men and women on the expense accounts, and those enjoying other corporate prerogatives—and with even more grievous effects on the standard and style of life of the higher middle and middle classes generally. And of course among recent crops of “Texas millionaires.”

12

The supposed shamefulness of labor, on which many of Veblen’s conceptions rest, does not square very well with the Puritan work ethic so characteristic of much of American life, including many upper class elements. I suppose, in the book at hand, Veblen is speaking only of upper, not middle classes—certainly he is not writing of wealthy Puritan middle classes. He did not want to call what the businessman does “work,” much less productive work. The very term, *leisure class*, became for him synonymous with upper class; but, of course, there is and there has been a *working* upper class—in fact, a class of prodigiously active people. That Veblen did not approve of their work, and in fact refused to give it that term—work being one of his positive words—is irrelevant. More-

over, in this case it obscures and distorts our understanding of the upper classes as a social formation. Yet for Veblen fully to have admitted this simple fact would have destroyed (or forced the much greater sophistication of) his whole perspective and indeed one of the chief moral bases of his criticism.

13

Veblen was interested in psychological gratification; he tended to ignore the social function of much of what he described. He would not, in fact, have liked the term "function" to be used in this way, because, given his values, the solid word "function" is precisely the sort he would have reserved for workmanlike men and forces. Consider merely as illustrations three close to hand:

Many of the social scenes with which Veblen had so much fun were, in fact, meeting places for various elite of decision, for prestige behavior mediates between various hierarchies and regions. Hence prestige is not merely social nonsense that gratifies the individual ego: it serves a unifying function; leisure activities are one way of securing a coordination of decision between various sections and elements of the upper class.

Such status activities also coordinate high families; they provide a marriage market, the functions of which go well beyond the gratifications of displayed elegance, of brown orchids and white satin: they serve to keep a propertied class intact and unscattered; by monopoly of sons and daughters, anchoring the class in the legalities of blood lines.

And "snobbish" exclusiveness, of course, secures privacy to those who can afford it. To exclude others enables the high-and-mighty to set up and to maintain a series of private worlds in which they can and do discuss issues and decisions and in which they train their young informally for the decision-making temper. In this way they blend impersonal decision-making with informal sensitivities, and so shape the character structure of an elite.

14

There is another function—today the most important—of prestige and of status conduct. Prestige buttresses power, turning it into authority, and protecting it from social challenge.

"Power for power's sake" is psychologically based on prestige gratification. But Veblen laughed so hard and so consistently at the servants and the dogs and the women and the