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Research Reflections

What Would Veblen Say?

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"Nothing is so practical as a good theory" is an old saying. I use this maxim as a point of departure for exploring the relevance of Thorstein Veblen’s (1934) *The Theory of the Leisure Class (TLC)* to contemporary leisure. Originally published in 1899, the book was a scathing attack on the greedy leisure class of his day. The book sheds light on how people use wealth and goods to bolster their social position in society. Surprisingly, few leisure scholars today use Veblen’s ideas to understand present-day leisure. To be fair, many passages in the book are dense and many people struggle with Veblen’s style of writing. Nevertheless, I believe TLC remains as relevant today as when it was first published. My goal is to elucidate some of Veblen’s ideas and then illustrate how they shed light on leisure phenomena. Readers are warned that I seek to poke fun at how Americans think and act. Veblen’s analysis was analytic, but his work had a strong moral undertone. He was also a bit of a satirist, and many of his examples of status seeking merit a good chuckle. It is in this spirit I consider Veblen. His ideas inform understanding leisure as scholars and as human beings.

Understanding TLC
A key premise of TLC is people strive for status and to elevate their social position in the eyes of others. Veblen used the term *emulation* to refer to a deep-seated motive that drove
individuals to seek invidious (favorable) comparisons with others. It impelled individuals to distance themselves from people judged to be unworthy while driving them to conform to the attitudes and behaviors of individuals deemed respectable. Although \textit{TLC} is largely a criticism of the leisure class of 19th century America, Veblen recognized emulation was practiced across all socio-economic levels.

Veblen’s ideas provide insight into the origins of social stratification. Veblen believed class differences stemmed from importance ascribed to various employments. Employments held in high esteem were exploitive in nature; unworthy employments smacked of drudgery and were deemed ignoble. Although distinctions in employment remained pervasive during Veblen’s lifetime, he believed status and social position were conferred increasingly on the basis of wealth alone.

Veblen recognized status did not automatically accrue to individuals who had wealth. Rather, status was obtained by putting wealth on display. One way is by engaging in \textit{conspicuous leisure}, which Veblen defined as “nonproductive consumption of time” (p. 43). The idea is people have sufficient wealth to pursue activities and develop skills that show they are \textit{exempt} from undignified work. According to Veblen, such skills included knowledge of dead languages, music, proprieties of dress, games and sports, and fancy-bred animals. People also advertised their social position via “manners and breeding, polite usage, decorum, and formal and ceremonial observances generally” (pp. 45–46).

Conspicuous leisure required \textit{considerable effort}. It was not enough to have free time; people had to demonstrate tangible proof they were exempt from debasing employments. The acquisition of manners and other skills required a specialized education involving “a laborious drill in deportment and an education in taste and discrimination as to what articles of consumption are decorous and what are the decorous methods of consuming them” (p. 50). Much exertion went into developing skills that come under the banner of conspicuous leisure.

A second way people advertise their wealth was through \textit{conspicuous consumption}. In this case goods and services were displayed to deliberately show off one’s social position. Although goods had practical value, Veblen recognized many goods were purchased because they are “a mark of prowess and perquisite of human dignity” (p. 69). Status was derived by being able to buy and show off goods and services that are excessive and too expensive for others to acquire. During the Gilded Age, elites paid exorbitant sums of money on clothes, jewelry, art, servants, travel, carriages and yachts, homes, and parties to display their social position (King, 2009).

Women’s clothing provides an example of conspicuous consumption. During Veblen’s lifetime, elite women wore clothing that was often impractical and adorned to give evidence that they were exempt from productive work and beholden to the men as reflected by “the high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer’s comfort” (p. 181). Today, many women continue to wear clothes that are uncomfortable, expensive, and display their subservient position. Such clothing is often worn for a relatively short duration and discarded with the introduction of new fashions. For many women, clothing functions primarily as adornment and secondarily as affording comfort.

Although the display of status can be achieved by either conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption, two reasons account for why Americans rely more on the latter to advertise their social position. First, most people have to work to make a living. Few Americans have independent means to spend their lives in pastimes that have little outward productive value. Second, we live in societies that are now highly mobile and where interactions are often ephemeral. Veblen recognized as societies become fast-paced, conspicuous consumption would supersede conspicuous leisure to convey one’s social position: “In order to impress ... transient observers, and to retain one’s self-complacency under their
observation, the signature of one’s pecuniary strength should be written in characters which he who runs may read” (p. 87).

Other points from TLC could be made, but I will flesh these out as I seek to demonstrate the relevance of Veblen’s work to contemporary leisure.

Stuff Girls Need

I was recently discarding some newspaper advertisements when my eye caught a two-page ad that read: “Stuff girls need . . . for so much less!” This particular advertisement included two teenage girls striking relaxed poses while wearing comfortable and reasonably priced pajamas. One set of items on the page caught my attention. These were four pairs of “fashion readers.” The glasses were priced at $19.99 each and came in red, pink, lime, and aqua. I suppose these were reasonably priced, although I have never actually priced fashion readers.

Elites in Veblen’s day would have probably giggled at the irony of the phrase “stuff girls need . . . for so much less!” Then again, advertisements such as this are not intended for people who need not worry about their budget. What really stands out for me is the assumption consumers need stuff displayed in advertisements like this one. Do we really need bright red fashion readers?

Most Americans can probably differentiate between an authentic need and a transitory want. Yet many people live their lives as though bright red fashion readers are something they truly needed. Veblen understood and argued people look upon many of the goods and services they buy as necessities. Peers and advertisers remind us constantly about what products, services, and tourism destinations are de rigueur. Most people have to settle for less but nonetheless make purchases on a range of goods and services as if needed. Veblen noted once people achieve a particular standard of living, that standard takes on the form of “habit” and only reluctantly do people recede from it.

These so-called “habits” are formed early and quite ingrained by the time of adulthood. Many young people grow up today feeling entitled to goods and opportunities that were unavailable to teens only 20 years ago. My college students do not find it unusual they own their own pickup trucks and laptops, live in luxury condominiums, and own pedigreed dogs. Many of them would agree all these things are stuff they need. Veblen observed standards for emulation are ever changing, which gives rise to a gradual dissatisfaction with current goods. This means that present thoughts about sufficiency are challenged as new standards of fashion arise. Thus, my students have graduated to more expensive trucks, houses, golf clubs, television sets, and vacation destinations.

According to Schor (1992), productivity in America doubled between 1948 and 1990. She made the case we could work as few as 20 hours per week and still maintain the same standard of living of a few generations ago. We could have used this gain in free time to take leisurely walks, learn our neighbors’ names, and volunteer at the local food pantry. Yet Americans prefer goods and services over free time. Veblen observed that status in the community will be judged increasingly by appearances and not by the skills obtained during leisure time. Thus, my standing among peers has little to do with my ability to identify bird songs or my knowledge of Abraham Lincoln. My reputation has everything to do with the car I drive, the size of my house, the art work I display, and my choice of vacation destinations. I need all this stuff. My position in the community demands it.

I'm Forcing Myself

In the 2006 film Priceless, Audrey Tautou plays Irène, a gold digger on the French Riviera who finds herself compromised when she confuses Jean, a poor bartender, for a rich suitor.
Without immediate prospects, Irène callously allows Jean to spend his small life savings on her in a 24-hour self-indulgent spree. One of Irène’s excesses is caviar, a food she loathes: “I don’t even really like caviar, but I’m forcing myself.” Irène knows she should cultivate a taste for this delicacy because it is expensive and she will be expected to consume more of it if she can find a man to take care of her.

Veblen would have understood Irène’s attitude. He noted people’s tastes and definitions of beauty are a product “of the expensiveness of the articles” (p. 127). Products that are expensive and in relative scarce supply will be regarded as intrinsically more beautiful, tasteful, and fashionable. Veblen’s classic example is his comparison between a silver and wrought-iron spoon. Although both are equally functional, the former is regarded by fashion-minded people as more beautiful and delicate simply on the basis of the expense that went into making it.

Americans make similar judgments regarding a range of goods and services. The corned beef I purchase at a top gourmet food store seems tastier than the corned beef my neighbor purchases at our local grocery store. The designer jeans I bought appear lovelier and seem to have a better fit than the jeans I tried on at Kmart. I keep telling my wife I will be able to enjoy birdwatching so much more with a $2,000 pair of binoculars. She just rolls her eyes.

At times I have failed to keep up appearances and this has caused me some embarrassment. On my single visit to the opera I fell sound asleep. My outdoor friends laugh at me because I think the sleeping bags at REI are overpriced. I always feel ridiculous being the only person at a wine and cheese party who is not making a fuss about how tasty the expensive pinot noir is. However, like Irène, I am forcing myself to drink it even though what I really want is a cold beer.

Books by the Yard

An amusing episode in Richard Russo’s (1997) book Straight Man is when the major character, William Henry Devereaux, Jr., visits Dickie Pope, the CEO at the western Pennsylvania university where he works. Devereaux, an English professor and interim chair, is left alone in Dickie’s office and he spends a few minutes browsing the books on his book shelves. Devereaux recalls a rumor that all the books had been purchased at local auctions and secondhand book stores just prior to Dickie taking office. Apparently Dickie had come to the college without any books of his own and he “sensed that it wouldn’t be a good idea to fill the shelves with family photos and ceramic knickknacks” (p. 155). Fearing derision, Dickie commissioned his secretary to fill up the book shelf with appropriate looking volumes that “befitted the chief executive officer of an institution of higher learning” (p. 155).

Veblen would have understood Dickie’s predicament. It is important to exhibit tangible evidence of social position. Many books academics display reflect an inquiring nature and varied interests. Sometimes we even open these books as we seek answers to life’s thorny questions. Even if we do not read books, most of us, like Dickie, need to maintain appearances. Thus, many books owned are for display purposes only. I own several of these books myself, and I have them strategically positioned so visitors can see just what kind of person I am.

The good news is businesses are specializing in helping create eye-catching libraries. One such company sells leather-bound books that are “visually enhancing and their addition to any decorative scheme creates an immediate impact and gives lasting pleasure.” Most of the books supplied by the company were “published and bound in the 18th and 19th centuries and are offered in a wide variety of colors.” The company assumes buyers will not actually
read the books—it is appearances that count after all. The books are “approximately six to nine inches in height and are primarily chosen for their decorative bindings rather than their subject matter.” Buyers who need to fill a lot of shelf space will be happy to know this company sells books by the yard!

I Need that Bird!

Serious birdwatchers across the United States celebrated their 15 minutes of fame in 2004 when *Sports Illustrated* published an article about three men’s battle to list as many birds as they could in a single calendar year. The competition, called a Big Year, is not for the faint of heart. It is a marathon birding extravaganza bordering on the obsessive. Participants spend thousands of dollars, travel untold miles crisscrossing North America, endure seasickness and extreme weather, and forsake loved ones and careers in their attempt to amass large lists of birds.

Big Year participants belong to a group of birdwatchers who describe themselves as *birders*. Most birders keep life lists of all the bird species they have identified by sight and sound. In their quest to list birds, they will travel long distances, often at a moment’s notice, to track down vagrants and accidentals. It is common to hear birders say, “I need that bird,” and off they go in pursuit of their target bird.

The stakes pursued by birders are minimal. No Big Year participant has become a household name. Nevertheless, Veblen would understand serious birders are motivated by standards of emulation that lead to patterns of conspicuous consumption. Seeing birds others have not seen is a badge of honor. Simultaneously, a life list remains a point of comparison among birders and compels them to travel long distances and spend large sums of money to list new birds.

Birders are not different from other recreationists. Standards of emulation exist across a whole range of pastimes and inspire participants to spend lavishly as they seek conquests and enhanced reputations. A collecting mentality is evident among golfers, white water rafters, rock climbers, baseball fans, and even world travelers. It is no coincidence the subtitle of the best selling travel book, *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* reads *A Traveler’s Life List*. I wonder how many Americans treat the book like gospel and spend excessively as they travel to places that they need to see.

It Would Never Do

During the Gilded Age, strict rules were in place regarding membership to high society. Many aspired to inclusion but few were deemed properly qualified. According to King (2009), “exclusion provided this new elite with its *raison d’être*: to be desirable, society must be seen as something distinct” (p. 5). Old English and Dutch families with money were judged eligible. The *nouveau riche* lacked the proper pedigrees and were often derogated for their working class origins. Could people of color hope to penetrate elite society? Flamboyant socialite Mamie Fish of this era provided a frank answer: “I shall not like to have to eat with Negroes. . . . It would never do. We cannot mix with the Negro at all, and Negro equality will never come about” (King, 2009, p. 85).

*TLC* skirted issues about racial ostracism as Veblen was interested in how people used wealth to impress others. However, he would not have been shocked by Mamie Fish’s blunt remark. Veblen believed emulation was a fundamental trait that motivated people to strive for social status among their peers. Therefore, attitudes and behavior conform to those whom we admire, and we distance ourselves from others deemed inferior. This view of *TLC* coincides with social psychologists’ certainty that humans are “mentally hardwired
to engage in categorical thought” and “we hold in our heads schemas that classify people into categories based on age, gender, race, and ethnicity” (Massey, 2007, p. 10).

Social position is bolstered, at least in part, by the company people keep. People create boundaries around their leisure to ensure they mix with the “right” company. Doing otherwise can mean a soiled reputation. College fraternities and sororities routinely screen would-be members on the basis of race, ethnicity, and physical appearance. White Americans created thousands of private swimming pools after municipal pools were desegregated in the 1950s. These pools allowed Whites “to exercise greater control over whom they swam with than was possible at public pools” (Wiltse, 2007, p. 183). I suppose my minority students and I would only make waves if we were to crash some all white church on Sunday. I can hear several long-standing parishioners say, “It would never do.”

**Killers of Baby Birds!**

In the late 1800s, a nascent Audubon Society formed and grew in response to the appalling destruction of birds for women’s dress. The plume trade resulted in the harvesting of millions of birds a year. The long showy feathers of herons and egrets were particularly valued as ornaments. A single egret feather was worth nearly twice its weight in gold (Weidensaul, 2007). Fashioned-minded women who wore plumes “were assailed with epithets: ‘Murderers! Killers of baby birds!’” (Kastner, 1986, p. 74). The Audubon Society was influential in lobbying the government to pass strict laws and establish wildlife refuges protecting birds from wanton killing.

Veblen understood people are wasteful in their efforts to maintain appearances: “In order to be reputable…[consumption] must be wasteful. No merit would accrue from the consumption of the bare necessaries of life, except by comparison with the abjectly poor who fall short even of the subsistence minimum” (p. 97). Just how wasteful are we? Judging from what we have done to our planet—unchecked deforestation, global warming, the decline of species diversity—I would say we have been very wasteful indeed. Were Veblen alive today, I am sure he would agree we will continue to abuse Earth as long as we remain obsessed with our appearances.

Early bird protection came about when ordinary people saw the connection between thoughtless destruction of avian wildlife and contemporary fashions. More importantly, many of the leaders of the movement to end the plume trade were women who had themselves adorned their dress with skins and feathers. One of these women, Harriet Lawrence Hemenway, experienced “a road-to-Damascus conversion and became a champion of conservation” (Weidensaul, 2007, p. 156).

Excesses stem from the need to keep up appearances. We can quit fashion and live a more humane, ecologically friendly lifestyle. We can live with less and forego many of the middle-class trappings called needs. Finally, we can take jobs that provide time to pursue activities in our communities that give pleasure and make us feel we are making a difference in the lives of others. The downside of doing all this is our peers may judge us as hopelessly unfashionable. I can live with that judgment if I know my lifestyle is one that will help save baby birds. I hope many others feel the same way.

**Conclusions**

In this essay, I have sought to show that TLC remains as relevant today as it was when it was first published in 1899. Yet few leisure researchers today use Veblen to explain leisure phenomena. This seems extraordinary given just how pervasive conspicuous consumption is in contemporary society. Likewise, leisure continues to be a site where individuals
seek to display their status and distance themselves from individuals and groups deemed undesirable. *TLC* will provide researchers theoretical guidance about how our need for status influences a whole range of leisure behavior, including our choice of activities, friends, and tourism destinations. *TLC* may also help explain how some people seek to live more simply. Some Americans are seeking to curb their lavishness and live more sustainably. Leisure researchers can use *TLC* to understand the challenges these individuals face as they seek to distance themselves from wasteful consumptive practices. I believe researchers will find the *TLC* a treasure trove as they seek to explain leisure in America and beyond. I also believe that *all of us* can live gentler and simpler lives if we read and understand Veblen.

**References**


