



The Theory of the Leisure Class

Thorstein Veblen

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Thorstein Veblen's groundbreaking treatise upon the evolution of the affluent classes of society traces the development of conspicuous consumption from the feudal Middle Ages to the end of the 19th century.

The explosion in prosperity and mass manufacture of goods during the era of industrialization was of pivotal interest to those working in the fledgling social sciences. Thorstein Veblen was no exception; in this ambitious work, he attempts to trace the origins of the class society which characterized the Western world at the close to the 1800s.

Beginning with the end of the Dark Ages, Veblen examines the evolution of the hierarchical social structures. How they incrementally evolved and influenced the overall picture of human society is discussed. Veblen believed that the human social order was immensely unequal and stratified, to the point where vast amounts of merit are consequently ignored and wasted.

Veblen draws comparisons between industrialization and the advancement of production and the exploitation and domination of labor, which he considered analogous to a barbarian conquest happening from within society. The heavier and harder labor falls to the lower members of the order, while the light work is accomplished by the owners of capital: the leisure class. Although Veblen acknowledges value in the leisure class's contributions, he believes that manual, material work has a far greater effect upon a given economy.

The other major pillar of Veblen's thought is that the leisure class is defined by conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. This entails the expenditure of vast sums upon items or activities which advertise wealth; the author highlights the newly popular fields such as sports and the fine arts as examples. In summary, Veblen states:

"In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence."

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