

The Theory of the Leisure Class

An Economic Study of Institutions

By THORSTEIN VEBLEN



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THE MAN:

Thorstein Veblen, a Westerner of Scandinavian stock, is one of the foremost economists of our age and generation. He graduated from Carleton College, Minnesota, in 1880, continued his studies at Johns Hopkins, and obtained the degree of Ph.D. at Yale, in 1884. Urbanity of manners, executive ability and an innate gift of shedding light upon difficult economic complexities, made him a lecturer and editor of enduring popularity in the field of political economy. His life-story as a university teacher is a long record of skillful, even-tempered resistance against encroachments upon academic freedom. He taught his specialty for more than a quarter of a century, first at the University of Chicago, then at Leland Stanford, and finally at the University of Missouri.

THE BOOK (1899):

American capitalism has established a larger number of hours of actual or potential leisure than can be found anywhere else on the face of the habitable globe. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is a thoroughly readable inquiry into their mode of life, their views and their habits of expenditure, enlivened by an undercurrent of polite sarcasm that forms the main characteristic of Veblen's writings. The book has gone through several editions; its pertinent, incisive criticism of the mentality of the average run of well-to-do people is as fresh and as vital now as at the time of first publication.

class here again favours the growth of a non-invidious attitude, which may, in the long run, prove a menace to the stability of the institution itself, and even to the institution of individual ownership on which it rests.

During the recent past some tangible changes have taken place in the scope of college and university teaching. These changes have in the main consisted in a partial displacement of the humanities — those branches of learning which are conceived to make for the traditional "culture," character, tastes, and ideals — by those more matter-of-fact branches which make for civic and industrial efficiency. To put the same thing in other words, those branches of knowledge which make for efficiency (ultimately productive efficiency) have gradually been gaining ground against those branches which make for a heightened consumption or a lowered industrial efficiency and for a type of character suited to the régime of status. In this adaptation of the scheme of instruction the higher schools have commonly been found on the conservative side; each step which they have taken in advance has been to some extent of the nature of a concession. The sciences have been intruded into the scholar's discipline from without, not to say from below. It is noticeable that the humanities which have so reluctantly yielded ground to the sciences are pretty uniformly adapted to shape the character of the student in accordance with a traditional self-centred scheme of consumption; a scheme of contemplation and enjoyment of the true, the beautiful, and the good, according to a

conventional standard of propriety and excellence, the salient feature of which is leisure — *otium cum dignitate*. In language veiled by their own habituation to the archaic, decorous point of view, the spokesmen of the humanities have insisted upon the ideal embodied in the maxim, *fruges consumere nati*. This attitude should occasion no surprise in the case of schools which are shaped by and rest upon a leisure-class culture.

The professed grounds on which it has been sought, as far as might be, to maintain the received standards and methods of culture intact are likewise characteristic of the archaic temperament and of the leisure-class theory of life. The enjoyment and the bent derived from habitual contemplation of the life, ideals, speculations, and methods of consuming time and goods, in vogue among the leisure class of classical antiquity, for instance, is felt to be "higher," "nobler," "worthier," than what results in these respects from a like familiarity with the everyday life and the knowledge and aspirations of commonplace humanity in a modern community. That learning the content of which is an unmitigated knowledge of latter-day men and things is by comparison "lower," "base," "ignoble," — one even hears the epithet "sub-human" applied to this matter-of-fact knowledge of mankind and of everyday life.

This contention of the leisure-class spokesmen of the humanities seems to be substantially sound. In point of substantial fact, the gratification and the culture, or the spiritual attitude or habit of mind, resulting from an habitual contemplation of the anthropomorphism, clan-nishness, and leisurely self-complacency of the gentle-

man of an early day, or from a familiarity with the animistic superstitions and the exuberant truculence of the Homeric heroes, for instance, is, æsthetically considered, more legitimate than the corresponding results derived from a matter-of-fact knowledge of things and a contemplation of latter-day civic or workmanlike efficiency. There can be but little question that the first-named habits have the advantage in respect of æsthetic or honorific value, and therefore in respect of the "worth" which is made the basis of award in the comparison. The content of the canons of taste, and more particularly of the canons of honour, is in the nature of things a resultant of the past life and circumstances of the race, transmitted to the later generation by inheritance or by tradition; and the fact that the protracted dominance of a predatory, leisure-class scheme of life has profoundly shaped the habit of mind and the point of view of the race in the past, is a sufficient basis for an æsthetically legitimate dominance of such a scheme of life in very much of what concerns matters of taste in the present. For the purpose in hand, canons of taste are race habits, acquired through a more or less protracted habituation to the approval or disapproval of the kind of things upon which a favourable or unfavourable judgment of taste is passed. Other things being equal, the longer and more unbroken the habituation, the more legitimate is the canon of taste in question. All this seems to be even truer of judgments regarding worth or honour than of judgments of taste generally.

But whatever may be the æsthetic legitimacy of the

derogatory judgment passed on the newer learning by the spokesmen of the humanities, and however substantial may be the merits of the contention that the classic lore is worthier and results in a more truly human culture and character, it does not concern the question in hand. The question in hand is as to how far these branches of learning, and the point of view for which they stand in the educational system, help or hinder an efficient collective life under modern industrial circumstances, — how far they further a more facile adaptation to the economic situation of to-day. The question is an economic, not an æsthetic one; and the leisure-class standards of learning which find expression in the deprecatory attitude of the higher schools towards matter-of-fact knowledge are, for the present purpose, to be valued from this point of view only. For this purpose the use of such epithets as “noble,” “base,” “higher,” “lower,” etc., is significant only as showing the animus and the point of view of the disputants; whether they contend for the worthiness of the new or of the old. All these epithets are honorific or humilific terms; that is to say, they are terms of invidious comparison, which in the last analysis fall under the category of the reputable or the disreputable; that is, they belong within the range of ideas that characterises the scheme of life of the régime of status; that is, they are in substance an expression of sportsmanship — of the predatory and animistic habit of mind; that is, they indicate an archaic point of view and theory of life, which may fit the predatory stage of culture and of economic organisation from which they

have sprung, but which are, from the point of view of economic efficiency in the broader sense, disserviceable anachronisms.

The classics, and their position of prerogative in the scheme of education to which the higher seminaries of learning cling with such a fond predilection, serve to shape the intellectual attitude and lower the economic efficiency of the new learned generation. They do this not only by holding up an archaic ideal of manhood, but also by the discrimination which they inculcate with respect to the reputable and the disreputable in knowledge. This result is accomplished in two ways: (1) by inspiring an habitual aversion to what is merely useful, as contrasted with what is merely honorific in learning, and so shaping the tastes of the novice that he comes in good faith to find gratification of his tastes solely, or almost solely, in such exercise of the intellect as normally results in no industrial or social gain; and (2) by consuming the learner's time and effort in acquiring knowledge which is of no use, except in so far as this learning has by convention become incorporated into the sum of learning required of the scholar, and has thereby affected the terminology and diction employed in the useful branches of knowledge. Except for this terminological difficulty — which is itself a consequence of the vogue of the classics in the past — a knowledge of the ancient languages, for instance, would have no practical bearing for any scientist or any scholar not engaged on work primarily of a linguistic character. Of course all this has nothing to say as to the cultural value of the classics, nor is there any intention to dis-

parage the discipline of the classics or the bent which their study gives to the student. That bent seems to be of an economically disserviceable kind, but this fact—somewhat notorious indeed—need disturb no one who has the good fortune to find comfort and strength in the classical lore. The fact that classical learning acts to derange the learner's workmanlike aptitudes should fall lightly upon the apprehension of those who hold workmanship of small account in comparison with the cultivation of decorous ideals:

Iam fides et pax et honos pudorque
Priscus et neglecta redire virtus
Audet.

Owing to the circumstance that this knowledge has become part of the elementary requirements in our system of education, the ability to use and to understand certain of the dead languages of southern Europe is not only gratifying to the person who finds occasion to parade his accomplishments in this respect, but the evidence of such knowledge serves at the same time to recommend any savant to his audience, both lay and learned. It is currently expected that a certain number of years shall have been spent in acquiring this substantially useless information, and its absence creates a presumption of hasty and precarious learning, as well as of a vulgar practicality that is equally obnoxious to the conventional standards of sound scholarship and intellectual force.

The case is analogous to what happens in the purchase of any article of consumption by a purchaser who is not an expert judge of materials or of workmanship. He makes his estimate of the value of the article chiefly on

the ground of the apparent expensiveness of the finish of those decorative parts and features which have no immediate relation to the intrinsic usefulness of the article; the presumption being that some sort of ill-defined proportion subsists between the substantial value of the article and the expense of adornment added in order to sell it. The presumption that there can ordinarily be no sound scholarship where a knowledge of the classics and humanities is wanting leads to a conspicuous waste of time and labour on the part of the general body of students in acquiring such knowledge. The conventional insistence on a modicum of conspicuous waste as an incident of all reputable scholarship has affected our canons of taste and of serviceability in matters of scholarship in much the same way as the same principle has influenced our judgment of the serviceability of manufactured goods.

It is true, since conspicuous consumption has gained more and more on conspicuous leisure as a means of repute, the acquisition of the dead languages is no longer so imperative a requirement as it once was, and its talismanic virtue as a voucher of scholarship has suffered a concomitant impairment. But while this is true, it is also true that the classics have scarcely lost in absolute value as a voucher of scholastic respectability, since for this purpose it is only necessary that the scholar should be able to put in evidence some learning which is conventionally recognised as evidence of wasted time; and the classics lend themselves with great facility to this use. Indeed, there can be little doubt that it is their utility as evidence of wasted time

and effort, and hence of the pecuniary strength necessary in order to afford this waste, that has secured to the classics their position of prerogative in the scheme of the higher learning, and has led to their being esteemed the most honorific of all learning. They serve the decorative ends of leisure-class learning better than any other body of knowledge, and hence they are an effective means of reputability.

In this respect the classics have until lately had scarcely a rival. They still have no dangerous rival on the continent of Europe, but lately, since college athletics have won their way into a recognised standing as an accredited field of scholarly accomplishment, this latter branch of learning—if athletics may be freely classed as learning—has become a rival of the classics for the primacy in leisure-class education in American and English schools. Athletics have an obvious advantage over the classics for the purpose of leisure-class learning, since success as an athlete presumes, not only a waste of time, but also a waste of money, as well as the possession of certain highly unindustrial archaic traits of character and temperament. In the German universities the place of athletics and Greek-letter fraternities, as a leisure-class scholarly occupation, has in some measure been supplied by a skilled and graded inebriety and a perfunctory duelling.

The leisure class and its standards of virtue—archaism and waste—can scarcely have been concerned in the introduction of the classics into the scheme of the higher learning; but the tenacious retention of the classics by the higher schools, and the high degree of

reputability which still attaches to them, are no doubt due to their conforming so closely to the requirements of archaism and waste.

"Classic" always carries this connotation of wasteful and archaic, whether it is used to denote the dead languages or the obsolete or obsolescent forms of thought and diction in the living language, or to denote other items of scholarly activity or apparatus to which it is applied with less aptness. So the archaic idiom of the English language is spoken of as "classic" English. Its use is imperative in all speaking and writing upon serious topics, and a facile use of it lends dignity to even the most commonplace and trivial string of talk. The newest form of English diction is of course never written; the sense of that leisure-class propriety which requires archaism in speech is present even in the most illiterate or sensational writers in sufficient force to prevent such a lapse. On the other hand, the highest and most conventionalised style of archaic diction is — quite characteristically — properly employed only in communications between an anthropomorphic divinity and his subjects. Midway between these extremes lies the everyday speech of leisure-class conversation and literature.

Elegant diction, whether in writing or speaking, is an effective means of reputability. It is of moment to know with some precision what is the degree of archaism conventionally required in speaking on any given topic. Usage differs appreciably from the pulpit to the market-place; the latter, as might be expected, admits the use of relatively new and effective words and turns

of expression, even by fastidious persons. A discriminate avoidance of neologisms is honorific, not only because it argues that time has been wasted in acquiring the obsolescent habit of speech, but also as showing that the speaker has from infancy habitually associated with persons who have been familiar with the obsolescent idiom. It thereby goes to show his leisure-class antecedents. Great purity of speech is presumptive evidence of several successive lives spent in other than vulgarly useful occupations; although its evidence is by no means entirely conclusive to this point.

As felicitous an instance of futile classicism as can well be found, outside of the Far East, is the conventional spelling of the English language. A breach of the proprieties in spelling is extremely annoying and will discredit any writer in the eyes of all persons who are possessed of a developed sense of the true and beautiful. English orthography satisfies all the requirements of the canons of reputability under the law of conspicuous waste. It is archaic, cumbrous, and ineffective; its acquisition consumes much time and effort; failure to acquire it is easy of detection. Therefore it is the first and readiest test of reputability in learning, and conformity to its ritual is indispensable to a blameless scholastic life.

On this head of purity of speech, as at other points where a conventional usage rests on the canons of archaism and waste, the spokesmen for the usage instinctively take an apologetic attitude. It is contended, in substance, that a punctilious use of ancient and accredited locutions will serve to convey thought more

adequately and more precisely than would the straight-forward use of the latest form of spoken English; whereas it is notorious that the ideas of to-day are effectively expressed in the slang of to-day. Classic speech has the honorific virtue of dignity; it commands attention and respect as being the accredited method of communication under the leisure-class scheme of life, because it carries a pointed suggestion of the industrial exemption of the speaker. The advantage of the accredited locutions lies in their reputability; they are reputable because they are cumbrous and out of date, and therefore argue waste of time and exemption from the use and the need of direct and forcible speech.