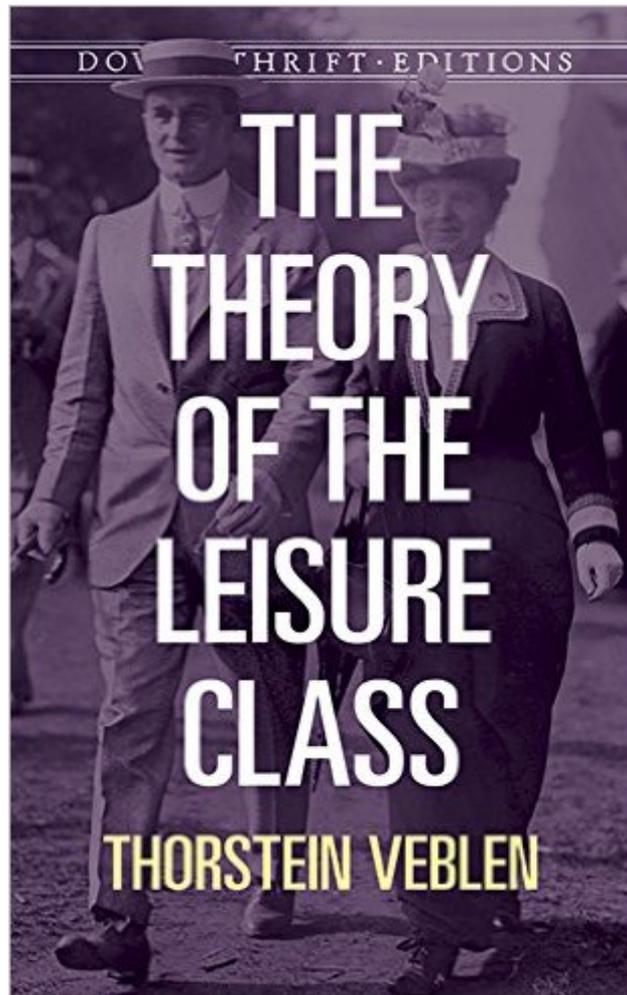


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The Theory Of The Leisure Class (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

"[T]he most impressive satirist of his day." "Time Magazine" With devastating satiric wit, this book examines the hollowness and falsity suggested by the term "conspicuous consumption" (coined by the author) and exposes the emptiness of many cherished standards of taste, education, dress, and culture. Since its original publication in 1899, the work has become a classic of social and economic theory that contributed strongly to the modernization of economic thought and policy and exerted an influence widely felt beyond the sphere of economics. For Veblen, the shallowness and superficiality of society resulted from the tendency to believe that true accomplishment lay in arriving at a condition of ostentatious wealth and status. In developing this thesis, he traces the origins and development of ownership and property, offering extraordinary insights into the phenomenon of consumerism, the evolution of class structure, the rise of leisure time and how modern societal goals are grounded in pecuniary aspiration and achievements. Students, sociologists, historians, economists "anyone interested in the motives and behavior of human beings within a large-scale social context" will find this time-honored investigation still relevant and readable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Known by his contemporaries as the only social theorist to apply Darwin critically, in 1899 Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class: A Economic Study of Institutions*, which was to become the basis from which all further American leisure history and theory stemmed. In his study, Veblen is primarily concerned with the "new rich," whom he regards as social parasites that retard

the growth of modern life. Thorstein Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* from a perspective that was largely isolated from his own culture, which either aided in his understanding of the Leisure Class or perhaps negatively influenced his opinions due to his exclusion from it. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen essentially confines man and woman's existence on the planet as a struggle to change and adapt with the growth of their communities. Through this belief, Veblen develops a theme that amounts to the idea of a certain "dominant" type of individual. This individual develops a social structure through dominance in which social advance is sought by others. She/he will feel the discrepancy between the modern life and traditional life during the process. Though Veblen's rhetoric is sometimes anxious, sometimes negative, he actively pursues a specific account of the origins of the Leisure Class through individuals. The struggle for individual advancement eventually expands to include society, and the more individual struggle for advancement in society leads to the accumulation of surplus goods. Surplus of conspicuous consumption by the Leisure Class gives the class license to indulge shamefully in pure conspicuous consumption, where their occupations eventually become leisure itself.

The basic premise of this book is that modern humans have inherited an instinct to compete with each other for material resources. This competition takes place within the context of a small groups that share the spoils of the competition amongst themselves. (Other primates essentially do the same thing). The theory hinges on the question of what happens when a group of people have access to essentially unlimited resources, but still have the competitive urge. Veblen's answer is that they simply compete amongst themselves to see who can afford to be the most wasteful (like the scene in that Woody Allen movie in which two guys start ripping up dollar bills to impress each other). He refers to such waste as "conspicuous consumption". According to Veblen, the urge to consume conspicuously explains a lot of human behavior, including fashion, sports, and religion. In all cases the consumer wants to demonstrate to his peers that he can't possibly be involved in doing anything useful. A particularly funny consequence of the urge to consume is the notion of "vicarious consumption," in which really rich people acquire other people (essentially servants and wives) to do their consuming for them. To emphasize the point they dress up their vicarious consumers in preposterous outfits and require them to perform pointless tasks with high precision (think of a butler in a tuxedo serving a 12-course meal or some such). In this vein, anthropomorphic religions essentially worship the richest guy of all. God is imagined to be so rich that he sits on a throne all day while people in silly clothes (clergy) do nothing but tend to his fabulous mansions (churches).

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