

Veblen's contribution to the analysis of (un-) sustainable consumption -

Overvalued and underestimated*

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RESUME. Le concept veblenien de consommation ostentatoire est souvent utilisé pour expliquer pourquoi les habitudes de consommation dans nos sociétés ont tendance à ne pas être durable et à être toujours croissantes. Cependant, plutôt que de condamner les habitudes de consommation individuelles, Veblen analyse les forces sociales et économiques qui modèlent la consommation non durable : les intérêts établis et la propriété absente. L'article suit le chemin que la pensée de Veblen a pris à travers la littérature économique et sociale au cours du siècle dernier et met en évidence la manière dont le débat contemporain sur la consommation durable pourrait faire un meilleur usage des connaissances de Veblen. Le déploiement d'une consommation durable suppose des changements radicaux, des innovations sociales et une nouvelle forme de penser..

ABSTRACT. Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption is often cited to explain why consumption habits in our consumer societies tend to be unsustainable and ever increasing. However, much more than blaming individual consumption habits Veblen sharply analyzed quite some of the societal and economic forces which drive the framework conditions for unsustainable consumption: the vested interests and the absentee ownership. The paper follows the path Veblen's thoughts have taken through economic and social literature over the last century and highlights how the actual sustainable consumption debate could make better use of Veblen's insights e.g. in requesting the constitutive institutions for property. Opportunities for Strong Sustainable Consumption obviously presuppose radical changes, social innovations and thinking out of the box.

MOTS-CLES : Veblen, consommation soutenable, changement structurelle, intérêts établis

KEYWORDS: Veblen, sustainable consumption, structural change, vested interests

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1. Introductory thoughts: The commonplaces about Veblen - and some mostly neglected aspects

We buy things we don't need, to impress people we don't like, using money we don't have' just for the purpose of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. This pursuit of personal style and identity through consumption seems to be a commonplace in modern consumer societies. And it is actively encouraged by manufacturers, retailers and advertising agencies. What tends to be forgotten: this phenomenon of consuming to show off is far from being new. Only few – and among them the dear readers of this special issue, of course – are aware, that one of the early writers about the issue was Thorstein Veblen at the end of the 19th century with his '*Theory of the Leisure Class*' (Veblen, 1899). Scholars of consumer research or related disciplines may refer to the 'Veblen Effect' in this context. But what they tend to oversee as well is that the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption is by far not the only, not even the most interesting concept the sustainable consumption discourse could take up from Veblen.

But let's stay with the '*Theory of the Leisure Class*' for a moment. At the time of Veblen only few people felt the book was likely to become a classic (Ward, 1900). The average reaction was to condemn the book and denied it as pessimistic and cynical. A very likely reason might be that the book uncovered quite some unpleasant truth. Reynard, for example, pointed out the book would be an interesting source for exponents of class war. Others remarked that '*A Theory of the Leisure Class* would have been a more appropriate title (Day, 1901; Reynard, 1925). Ward, in turn, defended Veblen arguing the book claimed to be an economic study in the *evolution* of institutions, while it's opponents treated it as an attempt on existing institutions (Ward, 1900).

However, those who predicted substantial recognition for the book were proved right. Some of Veblen's former critics even changed their minds. With a 35-year distance Dorfman confessed that he would write a very different review of the book than he did in 1899. In fact, he blamed himself for being so blind not to see the value of the contribution Veblen was making to economic and social philosophy (Dorfman, 1934). But obviously, it is neither distance in time nor any other prove through history which makes the difference whether Veblen's ideas fall on fruitful ground or encounter annoyed opposition. Also reviewers of more recent times are split in opinion. Perkin, for instance, stated that the book was written in an abstract and blasé style without a shred of evidence other than appealing to commonplace experience (Perkin, 1972). Others are still enthusiastic, even after a century. Some scholars value his work as a first milestone in the studies of consumption and see Veblen as a true prophet who had the power to change permanently the way people think about themselves and society. To formulate it in the most neutral way it can be said that it is difficult to read Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* without being influenced by him, in whichever way (Brooks, 1981; Tilman, 1992; Røpke and Reisch, 2004).

However, even among Veblen proponents there is no consensus regarding the central meaning of his work (Tilman, 1996). Some see him as a reformer, others as a

revolutionary (Mayhew, 2000). What can be recognized is that conspicuous consumption has transcended the boundary between academic and popular discourses. The theory of status and prestige and the vocabulary he developed in this context are familiar to parts of the public who never read a word of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Edgell, 1992; Tilman, 2007). In 1990 Veblen and his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* even made the way to Hollywood. In the movie 'Mrs Bridge' the female main character 'flirts with the ideas of Thorstein Veblen' to induce changes in her life (Schickel, 1990).

This paper reflects on (nearly) all Veblen's writings from the perspective of sustainable consumption research. Attention is given to 'The Theory of the Leisure Class' but also his other books and articles for example on 'The Theory of Business Enterprises' (Veblen, 1904), 'The Instinct of Workmanship' (Veblen, 1914), 'The Vested Interest' (Veblen, 1919) or the 'Absentee Ownership' (Veblen, 1923). Can the recent discourse how to make individual and societal consumption patterns sustainable learn from them? And if so: what can we learn?

The paper proceeds in the following way: Section 2 briefly sets the context in which this Veblen analysis is set through providing some basic information about sustainable consumption research and the position the author is taking in it. Section 3 takes a closer look into Veblen's writings and main messages through the lenses of sustainable consumption research. Special attention is given to what Veblen calls 'wasteful behaviour' not only through conspicuous consumption but also conspicuous leisure. It then turns to the socio-economic system and the underlying drivers Veblen identifies as problematic as e.g. the absentee ownership, the dichotomy between business and industry, the instinct of workmanship, the paternal bent, and the idle curiosity. Section 4 explores how Veblen's work was taken up, developed and adopted over the century until now. Here as well mainly those aspects are emphasized which could inform, or perhaps inspire, the actual debate. A specific focus is therefore given to the context of ecology. Section 5 adopts the findings to the context of sustainable consumption and evaluates potential contributions, limits, and contradictions.

2. Sustainable Consumption

As the readers of this journal and especially this special issue may know quite some about Veblen but maybe quite few about sustainable consumption in general and even less about the actual stage of research this section shall enable the readers to follow the perspective from which Veblen's writings are seen.

Consumption is vital element within the large(r) system of economy. The economy itself is part of the systems through which human society has structured its interaction within the natural system of planet earth. Why should we design consumption in a sustainable way? The goal to achieve sustainable consumption was formulated at the UN Conference for Environment and Development (United Nations, 1992) based first on the insight that in the long run planetary boundaries are setting limits and second that societies work better if they are based on democracy

and best on equality (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2009). Unsustainable consumption patterns have been identified as the major cause of unsustainable development. Chapter 4 of Agenda 21, 'Changing Consumption Patterns', called on all countries to strive to promote sustainable consumption patterns, with developed countries taking the lead (United Nations, 1992).

This represented a shift from earlier times when the production side was mainly the focus of environmental concerns. Since the greening and cleaning of the industries and broad adoption of the end of the pipe technologies have become mainstream in industrialised countries consumers were shift in the focus of environmental policies and increasingly regarded not only as victims of environmental pollution but also their cause.

However, the term sustainable consumption on a political agenda as well as in academic writing and day to day decisions can carry different meanings (Princen, 1999; Røpke, 1999) and indeed has changed over time (Autio and Heinonen, 2007; van den Burg, 2007; Mont and Plepys, 2008). It is mainly following the argumentation – and interests – of those who have the power to define the direction of the discourse (Zenóbio Gunneng, 2006).

First, sustainable consumption can refer to sustainable resource consumption, taking into account the complete product life cycle. In this context, the term stands for limiting the consumption of depletable resources, often via more efficient use or by their substitution with renewable resources and the use of renewable resources limited to their reproduction rate. Sustainable resource consumption involves the consumption patterns of industries, Governments, households and individuals (United Nations, 1992).

Secondly, sustainable consumption can be used in the sense of macroeconomics as aggregate term of public and private consumption. In this context it focuses on the demand by public and private households and its responsibility for the ecological consequences of consumption decisions. This neglects the responsibility of business and industry and instead awards them the function of mere providers of more sustainable consumption options (European Commission, 2008).

Third, sustainable consumption can be limited to private consumption only, as reflected in the concepts of sustainable household consumption or sustainable consumption behaviour (Thorgersen and Ölander, 2003; von Geibler, Kuhndt *et al.*, 2004; Lucas, Brooks *et al.*, 2008). Here emphasis is given to case studies and single product advice to consumers (Raynolds, 2002; Smith, 2007). As a result of such a narrow focus on products and services, one of the major elements of today's sustainable consumption discourse is to encourage consumers to play their roles as active market actors and to take responsibility to buy green or more sustainable products.

Considering the ecological challenges we face, slight adjustments within the system relying mainly on technological solutions and a product-based sustainable consumption approach run the risk sooner or later of encountering long expected disasters from a peak in oil supply to climate change. At best, this approach can

postpone disasters (Garner, 2000). Thus, relying on a product-based approach can only lead to *weak* sustainable consumption patterns (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). In fact, it is rather a greening approach for selected products, for some individuals or a few lifestyle groups than a coherent concept (Hartmann, 2009).

Agenda 21 mainly argues in the sense of sustainable resource consumption and thus calls for significant changes in the consumption patterns of industries, governments, households and individuals (United Nations, 1992). Also in the context of this paper it seems to be the most useful definition not only for strategic reasons but for conceptual ones, too. Only such a broad understanding helps to bridge between the individual consumption perspective Veblen is often narrowed to and the system thinking he developed in lots of his writings. This concept is described as strong sustainable consumption (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). As opposed to its weak understanding, strong sustainable consumption covers a broader scope that includes products and efficiency, but also goes beyond these concerns. Instead of focussing on the markets, the economy and the support for proactive entrepreneurs the limited resources availability (including the available sink capacity of the ecosystem) and the uneven way they are distributed among the Earth's population are taken as the starting point for intervention. In this context sustainable consumption also gives specific attention to the levels and patterns of consumption it recognises consumers as responsible citizens accepting as well the social embeddedness of behavioural decisions. Additionally, it strengthens social developments to perceive well-being as largely independent from material commodities (Layard, 2005; Marks, Simms *et al.*, 2006) and to increase human well-being through social structures (Hofstetter and Madjar, 2003).

To achieve such strong sustainable consumption obviously needs radical changes, social innovations and thinking out of the box. And exactly such thinking is what Veblen provided.

3. Veblen's writings through the sustainable consumption lenses

In the related academic discourses *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is widely regarded as the starting point on conspicuous consumption. This is (1) neither entirely correct nor (2) does it credit Veblen's intention with the book. Regarding (1) the term 'conspicuous consumption' appeared in Veblen's writings earlier already in an article entitled *The Economic Theory of Woman's Dress* written in 1894. Also, Veblen was neither the discoverer nor the first to elaborate upon the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption. Leibenstein pointed out that earlier references came from John Rae, Alexander Pope and even the Roman poet Horace (Leibenstein, 1950).

More important however is (2) that Veblen's main intention with writing the book was to open a discussion about the inadequacy of the American system of finance capitalism and so far from specific research in the field of the conspicuous economic display (Mason, 1981; Mason, 1998). Instead conspicuous consumption was only a particular feature of the society his political and economic critique was

centered around. This becomes more obvious when recalling the full title of the book: *The Theory of the Leisure Class - An Economic Study of Institutions*.

Nevertheless, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was Veblen's first book and lots of ideas first laid out there were further developed and elaborated in his later works, for example in a series of articles in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Veblen, 1899a; Veblen, 1899b; Veblen, 1900) and in his further books *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (Veblen, 1904), *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (Veblen, 1914), *The Higher Learning in America* (Veblen, 1918), *The Vested Interests and the State of the Industrial Arts* (Veblen, 1919), *The Engineers and the Price System* (Veblen, 1921), and *Absentee Ownership: Business Enterprise in Recent Times: the Case of America* (Veblen, 1923).

Mainly his last three books focused—again—on the aspect of predilections and waste, this time more from the perspective of the corporate capitalist order. (Tilman, 1993) identified five ideas in Veblen's writings especially representing his way of thinking:

- He emphasized the emancipatory potential of the machine process, provided that it served the community.
- He sharply distinguished between business and industry with a stress on the difference between making money and making socially useful goods;
- His analysis of the legal and political institutions increasingly supporting the vested interests of business. Veblen here recognized a zero-sum game the wealthy and powerful win and the underlying population loose;
- His emphasis on the compulsive force of idea patterns and the inability of the common man to overcome their hold on him, exemplified in Veblen's theory of emulatory consumption;
- His value driven 'generic ends of life': critical intelligence (idle curiosity), altruism (parental bent) and proficiency of craftsmanship (instinct of workmanship).

This list indicates: reducing Veblen to his contribution to conspicuous consumption is not only inadequate, it also disguise the access to much deeper and more fruitful approaches that deserve attention in the context of sustainable consumption. In the following the section synthesizes some core messages which have potential to still inspire 21st centuries discourse: wasteful consumer behavior, underlying drivers in the economic systems and the question of values.

3.1. Wasteful consumer behavior

People above the line of bare subsistence do not use the surplus, which society has given them, primarily for useful purposes. They do not seek to

expand their own lives, to live more wisely, intelligent, understandingly but to impress other people with the fact that they have a surplus.

This is how Chase summarizes the thesis of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in his foreword to the 1934 edition of the book¹ (Chase, 1934, xiv).

Veblen identified two main ways through which an individual can display wealth: through conspicuous leisure which are extensive leisure activities and through conspicuous consumption meaning lavish expenditure through consumption and services. What of both of these types of display have in common for Veblen was the element of wasting an aspect of major concern for him (Varul, 2006).

3.1.1. Conspicuous Leisure

The Theory of the Leisure Class was based on observation of the evolution of a leisure class whose members were not required to work but are able to live from the surplus others produce for them. These others were the working class. As Veblen developed in his writing the societal reasons for this development depended on (1) the growth of technical knowledge and (2) a fundamental distinction between an industrial class (workers) engaged in productive activities, and an predatory class (business) of 'parasitic' business members. This caused the development of a hierarchy in which some people managed to own property and others did not. In Veblen's days owning property was to have status and honor. Consequently, not having property meant lacking status. Within this hierarchy the old money held by aristocratic families provided the highest status since it established the greatest distance from work required for its accumulation (Trigg, 2001).

Veblen, of course, acknowledged that the excess of conspicuous leisure previously a typical phenomenon of aristocrats was becoming rarer already at his time. With the shift from traditional to a modern and more mobile society people anyway were less well-informed about the leisure activities in which other people engaged. Thus, firstly, the display of wealth through consumption of goods became more important than the display of leisure. Secondly, employers were increasingly involved in productive activity again and were not preoccupied with their own ability to consume substantial amounts of leisure time. Nevertheless, conspicuous leisure had not disappeared, but changed in nature. Greater emphasis was laid in this course on the leisure of wife and servants, who were thus made responsible for securing the family's social reputation within the community (Veblen, 1899; Campbell, 1995; Mason, 1998).

3.1.1. Conspicuous Consumption

The shift to engage in conspicuous consumption derived, according to Veblen, from a process in which individuals compared themselves with others in monetary possessions: the so-called 'invidious comparison' or 'emulation'. Conspicuous

1. This might also be the reason why 'conspicuous consumption' got so prominently linked to Veblen.

consumption thus described a category of intentional actions in which the goal was to bring about an improvement in others' opinions of oneself through goods and their display (Campbell, 1995). Veblen himself used phrases like 'excel in pecuniary standing', 'gain the esteem and envy of [their] fellow-men', 'outdo one another', '[desire] to excel everyone in the accumulation of goods', or 'a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between [oneself] and the average standard'.

Veblen distinguished between different motives for consuming conspicuous goods:

- *Invidious comparison* referred to situations in which members of a higher class consume conspicuously to either seek to secure horizontal status gains from others in their own class or in parallel aspirant groups, or to distinguish themselves from members of a lower class. They voluntarily incur costs, knowing that these costs must be large enough to discourage imitation.
- *Pecuniary emulation* occurred when a member of a lower class consumed conspicuously, seeking recognition from higher groups to be classified as equal in terms of social position and prestige (Mason, 1981; Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996).

Both forms point to the same phenomenon: people buy expensive goods not because they are better but because they are (more) expensive. So, in the context of conspicuous consumption, style and fashion lost touch with function. Veblen illustrated this in the following way.

A hand-wrought silver spoon, of a commercial value of some ten to twenty dollars, is not ordinarily more serviceable—in the first sense of the word—than a machine-made spoon of the same material. It may not even be more serviceable than a machine-made spoon of some 'base' metal, such as aluminum, the value of which may be no more than some ten to twenty cents. [...] the hand-wrought spoon gratifies our taste, our sense of the beautiful, while that made by machinery out of the base metal has no useful office beyond a brute efficiency (Veblen, 1899, 88²).

To sum up here, Veblen took a quite clear and sharp position to individual wasting of time and money. However, a closer reading of his writings make this a side aspect only as the next sections will develop.

3.2. Underlying drivers in the socio-economic system

Despite the reflection on individual behavior, Veblen mainly provided a theory of consumption in *cultural* as opposed to *individual* terms (Mitchell, 2001). In this theory, again, the concept of wasting played a major role but in a broader sense.

2. Page number according to the reprint in of the original work by Outlook, Bremen, 2011

Here he considered wasting as unproductive consumption and unproductive investment and labor (Tilman, 1997; Varul, 2006).

3.2.1. *Observations of society*

Veblen was an early analyst of the industrial development. According to Veblen entrepreneurs in their early days were adventurers in an industrial enterprise. Veblen regarded them as persons of 'chiefly industrial insight' and of initiative and energy, who were able to develop new mechanical technology and to tune these technological resources to new uses and more efficiency. He called them *captains of workmanship* and *captains of business* both at the same time, pioneers in both respects which balanced between workmanship and salesmanship. For him they were true entrepreneurs, the fourth factor of production beside land, labor, and capital (Veblen, 1923).

What Veblen observed and criticized however was that in the process of industrialization the function of the entrepreneur gradually fell apart in a twofold division of labor between business and industry. Already in his times Veblen was an eyewitness to wasteful farming practice and to business domination. He saw farmers more preoccupied with real estate values and collusive arrangements than with food production. Such preoccupations more and more motivated commercial farming. The examples he analyzed ranged from producing luxury crops like coffee and tea in many tropical countries to large-scale poultry operations in the American Midwest (Mitchell, 2001). Veblen described the plight of American farmers as being manipulated by background vested interests. So on one hand he criticized farmers for their often wasteful agricultural practice to satisfy pecuniary interests but also recognized that those farmers in fact were victims of merchants who paid little for agricultural products but sold them to consumers at much higher prices.

But that was one aspect only. In industry Veblen observed that owners concentrated on monetary business concerns and accountancy much more than of the industrial plant and its employees. Thus he criticized that realities of the business world were money values only and mainly cared to create needs to be satisfied at a price paid to him (Veblen, 1923).

One of the prevailing problems in Veblen's view was that as industry became increasingly specialized, a state of affairs was reached in which the business controllers of the industrial sphere had little knowledge or understanding of its functioning. By increasing profits through producing and selling more goods rather than improving production technologies and processes, Veblen felt that businessmen turned to wasteful business practices or were manipulated by such things like market speculation and state sanctioned collusion. He argued that an inherently poor understanding of efficient production practice led most managers and owners to want only exploit resources. He foresaw that the increased processing efficiency was responsible for the extraction of unprecedented volumes of raw materials, often leaving local communities in the hand of corporate board room decisions. As the underlying cause of wasteful industrial and civil practice Veblen saw especially the

absentee ownership (Mitchell, 2001). This absentee ownership formed an important argument for Veblen's analysis of economic and social development.

Therefore in his book *Absentee Ownership: Business Enterprise in Recent Times* Veblen examined the historical development of a property structure in which landlords were distant from their holdings. This structure introduced bureaucracy and alienation into land use practices. Veblen believed that absentee ownership had become most developed in the US and that rural poverty and loss of community identity had begun to increase with urban wealth and power. Veblen viewed absentee ownership as very much related to external power over communities. American absentee owners knew little and cared even less about the community at stake, preferring instead a situation of weak local governance to be able to impose their policies of sabotage (Mitchell, 2007a). The farmers in such an economic system were placed in a position that both as a producer and as a consumer they had to deal with business concerns, but from such a weak position where they could only take or leave a contract. Therefore the margin of benefit they could gain through their work was commonly at a minimum. Absentee ownership became the rule in economic life after the transition to the machine industry when investment became the typical form of ownership and control. Business concerns, in which the ownership and control of the industrial equipment and its working were vested, grew larger, carried more volume of transaction, gained more of an impersonal financial character and eventually passed over into the wholly impersonal form of the corporation of the joint stock company with limited liability.

As said, before the advent of the machine technology Veblen contended the employer-owner to be a captain of industry, a pioneer in industrial enterprise, designer, builder and manager of industrial equipment. He as well was a businessman who took care of the financial end. But the latter aspect was less important. By the transformation into a businessman, a financier, speculator, or promoter, the captain of industry had become an absentee, an outsider as far as any creative work was concerned. According to Veblen, these changes were incompatible with a full utilization of the productive capacity afforded by the machine process and thus incompatible with achieving maximum material welfare for the underlying population (Veblen, 1923; Harris, 1953).

Veblen already saw that the destructive effects of absentee ownership were not limited to an American context. He argued that economics should not be studied as a closed system but rather as an aspect of a culture whose customs and habits constitute institutions that are rapidly changing. While industry demands diligence, efficiency and cooperation among businessmen Veblen instead saw companies run by selfish captains of industry interested in making money and the gentry displaying their wealth or status through conspicuous consumption. Veblen believed that a high degree of technological efficiency could already be found within existing industrial units.

Consequently, in *The Engineers and the Price System* he articulated a system designed to overcome the lack of coordination between large corporations throughout the economy (Veblen, 1921; Tilman, 1996). In this book he explicitly

focused on the engineers and technicians for an examination of their transformative capacities. Tilman assumed this was because Veblen had realized the rather limited revolutionary potential among American farmers or workers (Tilman, 1993). Veblen went as far as to propose to disallow anything like free discretionary control or management on grounds of ownership alone whenever the responsible owner did not at the same time also personally oversaw and physically directed the work in which his property was engaged (Veblen, 1923). Still, he left open who was to disallow the right of absentee ownership, by what means it was to be disallowed and to whom the responsibility running industry was to be given instead (Harris, 1953). What he did was proposing to transfer power from commercial-minded businessmen to engineers, the profession he put quite high hopes in (Veblen, 1921).

3.2.2. *Veblen's discourse in economics*

Much of Veblen's reputation as a radical dissenter was based on his critique of classical and neoclassical economics. He especially criticized the economic consumption theory to fail because it refused to recognize that a large part of an individual's consumption of goods and services was shaped by social relationships and by the need to secure status within society (Mason, 1998).

According to Veblen individual utility preferences could not be understood except in relation to the utility preferences of others because individuals were emulating others in order to strengthen their own sense of self-worthiness by commanding more social esteem. The assumption of atomistic individualism and consumer sovereignty deemed valid by micro-economists but were specious on socio-psychological grounds (Veblen, 1909; Tilman, 1997).

Some of his further criticism focused on the marginal productivity theory, which claimed to explain the distribution of income without explaining how the factors of production, as well as land, labor and capital came to be owned as they were. In contrast to the individual's static maximization of utility according to exogenous preferences, as posited by the neoclassical approach, Veblen developed an evolutionary framework in which preferences were built interdependently, affected by others' choices (Paavola, 2001). They are especially determined in relation to the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy where individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher positions in the hierarchy. The social norms that govern such emulation change, so Veblen, as the economy and its social fabric evolve over time. This – and only this – builds the *Veblen Effect*. But the intention of this article is to remember scholars – and especially those dealing with sustainable consumption issues – that consumption theory only accompanied Veblen's production theory, which included the phenomenon described in the previous chapter as business enterprise, economic expansions, advertising and salesmanship, absentee ownership and vested interest (Trigg, 2001; Saram, 2007).

Veblen also was one of the first economists writing on advertising and marketing as symbols of contemporary aspects of capitalism. He especially blamed marketing as the new 'Propaganda of Faith', only less efficient for deploring the huge volume

of waste in the form of raw materials, labor, and equipment generated by newsprint publicity (Veblen, 1923; Mitchell, 2007).

3.3. *Veblen's values*

As outlined before, Veblen passionately elaborated on the dichotomy between business and industry. Business he viewed as the wasteful accumulation of profit, and industry as the production of useful wealth (Mitchell, 2001). Thus he separated between

- free income versus tangible performance;
- individual surplus as opposed to community serviceability;
- invidious emulation versus technological efficiency, and
- competitive advertising versus the provision of valuable information and guidance.

To Veblen, most of the activities the business community was engaged in were wasteful and futile, since the profitability of market exchange did not necessarily measure its social value in achieving the 'generic ends of life'. These generic ends of life—or the fullness of life—were central to Veblen. He found these values embedded in the instinct of workmanship, parental bent and idle curiosity, all of which flourish in a properly developing society.

The instinct of workmanship (also described as workmanship or craftsmanship) induced the creation and production for personal satisfaction and for societal approval. Thus the instinct of workmanship served as a general driver for survival and social advance within the community. Veblen identified the general propensity towards the industrial as 'the instinct of workmanship'. It was the efficient use of pragmatic knowledge and meant to realize material well-being and the common good of the community at large and of future generations. In contrast to this, he regarded the tendencies of the pecuniary bent as sportsmanship and salesmanship.

The parental bent (also described as parenthood, social instinct or altruism) Veblen saw as an inclusive societal force, concerned for the wellbeing of others, especially driven by one's identification with the community and a willingness to make sacrifices, even against one's own well-being. According to Veblen, community solidarity was once formidable enough to put self-interest in the rear.

Idle curiosity (elsewhere described as critical inquiry, critical intelligence, scientific spirit) was described as a non-directed activity of exploration in the search for answers to the interests of life, a systematized knowledge and quasi-knowledge of things, an instinct that drove to 'seek knowledge, and value it apart from any ulterior use of the knowledge so gained' (Tilman, 1993; Tilman, 1996; Mitchell, 2007; Plotkin, 2007).

The achievement of the generic ends of life, or fullness of life, as he sometimes put it, depended on the communities' ability to distinguish between functional and status enhancing consumption (Tilman, 2007).

Veblen especially claimed that the 'instinct of workmanship is the most important sense for collective well-being which cannot be adequately measured by a price system or through market exchange. Veblen strongly opposed the moral agnosticism that he found pervasive in the neoclassical view of value as a subjective preference measurable only by price (Tilman, 1997; Mitchell, 2001).

Some criticism, however, appeared with respect to his elaborations on the generic ends of life. Day pointed out that Veblen was not adequately specific which pursuits were industrial and which were businesslike, or which were both. So he regarded Veblen's definition of conspicuous activities as waste as highly arbitrary not at least because Veblen neglected to explain who could or should decide whether a given activity or expenditure led to a 'net gain in comfort' or to 'the fullness of life' (Day, 1901).

4. The uptake of 'conspicuous consumption'

If we regard the value of Veblen's contribution in explaining wasteful consumption, we should take into account the full heritage of Veblen's writings. By doing so we can gain knowledge about the reasons why and how the status (and ego) driven consumption that was applicable to conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption in earlier times was replaced by a production (and market) driven consumption under business enterprise. Veblen paved the way for a further analysis of the transition from late-modern 'consumption' to post-modern 'consumerism' where consumption is no longer a mere 'class act' but a phenomenon of mass involvement and where it represents the culture of consumerism (Saram, 2007).

Since Veblen's days the societal and scientific perception of conspicuous consumption has developed, expanded and constantly changed its form of appearance. Was it once an exclusive behavior of aristocrats, the changes in the industrializing economies (around the 1850s) allowed a new business class to engage in conspicuous consumption. The first era of generalized conspicuous consumption as a mass phenomenon began in the 1940s. Part of the unprecedented growth in consumer demand was directly attributed to the fact that business organizations by then were widely and explicitly selling products as symbols of social status. The shift towards conspicuous consumption was additionally stimulated through the fact that with increasing productivity, working hours dropped and leisure time for all significantly increased. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s the importance of status-motivated consumption increased significantly again. As the ownership of traditional status symbols like cars, fashion cloth and furniture was widespread and commonplace, consumers' attention turned to the relative status value of individual brands. By now conspicuous consumption has spread around the world, with more than half of the global consumer class located in developing countries.

Several critiques were - and still are - made on Veblen's approach to conspicuous consumption. In order to keep Veblen's thinking alive, scholars had to

develop it further and re-interpret it to overcome mainly the following shortcomings (Trigg, 2001):

- It too restrictively relied on the 'trickle down' effect of consumption patterns.
- It lacked generality as it applies only to luxury goods.
- The approach were old-fashioned as consumers not necessarily display their wealth conspicuously.
- Consumer behavior is no longer shaped by positions of social class but cut across the social hierarchy.

4.1. Recognition of conspicuous consumption in economic literature

In his book *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption: Theory and Thoughts Since 1700* Roger Mason analyzes how economics dealt with economic aspects of status consumption (Mason, 1998). What he found was more or less a reluctance of economists to explore the nature and consequences of conspicuous consumption for the following reasons:

- the morally repugnant nature of ostentation and emulation;
- the apparently irrational nature of conspicuous consumption;
- a presumed confinement of truly ostentatious display to a small social elite;
- the desire not to sully economics by addressing the same questions as sociologists and social psychologists, and
- the difficulty of treating aggregate demand graphically and mathematically when individual preferences are dependent on the consumption decisions of other people (Mayer 1999).

Only a few and more recent scholars have substantially contributed to the discussion. The term *Veblen effect*, for instance, was first used in 1950 by Leibenstein (Leibenstein, 1950). He described it as a phenomenon of conspicuous consumption in which the demand for a consumer good is increased because of a higher rather than a lower price which goes back to Veblen's illustration of the handmade spoon.

Leibenstein distinguished the *Veblen effect* from two other phenomena, the *bandwagon effect* (pecuniary emulation according to Veblen's terms), which is increased due to the fact that others are also consuming the same commodity so to associate with a specific group, and the *snob effect* (invidious comparison according to Veblen) where consumption is decreased if others are consuming the same good to show difference. According to his taxonomy all three types belong to non-functional demands with external effects on utility. Steiner and Weiss one year later added the *counter snobbery effect* which describes status enhancement via a more

austere and simple taste and lifestyle (Steiner and Weiss, 1951). Leibenstein explicitly abstracted from all psychological and sociological elements and exclusively addresses the effects that the Veblen effect had on the demand function. As essential economic characteristic he saw that the utility derived from a unit of a commodity employed for purposes of conspicuous consumption depend not only on the inherent qualities of that unit, but also on the price paid for it. Leibenstein therefore divided the price of a commodity into two categories: the real price and the conspicuous price. The real price for him was the price the consumer paid for the commodity in terms of money. The conspicuous price referred to the price other people think the consumer paid for the commodity. Even more accurately, the conspicuous price should be the price that the consumer thinks other people think he paid for the commodity—and which therefore determines its conspicuous consumption utility (Leibenstein, 1950).

It was only in the 1980s when finally conventional micro-economic analysis was conducted to identify and measure Veblen effects. Bagwell and Bernheim opposed Leibenstein and his assumption that Veblen's theories simply preceded from the premise that price enhances utility. Instead, they argued that Veblen proposed individuals crave for status and that status is enhanced by material display of wealth. Thus in a theory of conspicuous consumption that is faithful to Veblen's analysis, utility should be defined over consumption and status, rather than over consumption and prices. They investigated the conditions under which Veblen effects—defined as a willingness to pay a higher price for a functionally equivalent good—arise from the desire to signal wealth. They developed an economic model considering decision making of households, social contacts and producers (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996). Interestingly, providing empirical evidence for the existence of the Veblen effect - as far as proved in the context of their model - had some provocative implications for public policy. As prices of luxury brands are demand driven the demand does not vary with the tax rate at least as long as the tax per unit does not exceed the difference between the consumer's preferred price and marginal cost, and as long as the tax does not fall on budget brands. (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996).

4.2. Veblen considered in social science

Also, social science tried to adapt Veblen's approaches to analyze conspicuous consumption over the century, at the same time keeping more critical voices. Here scholars stated that pure conspicuous consumption in Veblen's sense of social classes was becoming rare. As the sensitivity of individuals to social class rankings had diminished among the more modern affluent societies this had served to depress the level of conspicuous consumption at least in the sense of secure status gains measured in traditional class terms. Nevertheless, it had survived in a modified form as an economic and social reality. In the 1950s Mills recognized what he called status panic, mainly among white-collar workers leading to a mass conspicuous consumption society version of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (Mills, 1956). In a more recent form conspicuous consumption is motivated not by social class distinctions but by how effective such consumption is regarded for gaining the

approval or membership of aspirant groups to which the individual refers to (Mason, 1981). This approach is thus related to Leibenstein's *bandwagon effect*.

Campbell considered how Veblen's theory could be verified empirically. In doing so he figured out that Veblen's term is rarely used in little more than a vague descriptive sense referring to any non-utilitarian forms of consumption, or merely to one which is judged as extravagant, luxurious, or wasteful. So he wondered what exactly Veblen's theory was and whether it can be formulated in a way it can be tested (Campbell, 1995). Campbell revealed that conspicuous consumption comprise conducts on two different levels: the changes that have occurred in the attitudes and opinions of others as a result to someone's conspicuous consumption and those changes which the aspirant conspicuous consumer imagines to have occurred. This second category was crucial because it is likely to determine the consumer's subsequent conduct. If conspicuous consumption was viewed as a continuing pattern of activity, such conduct presumably would be repeated only if it is judged as successful. If conspicuous consumption was defined as a form of conduct undertaken with the explicit aim of impressing others with one's wealth it was seen necessary for an adequate theory of conspicuous consumption to specify clearly who the target audience was considered to be, what motivated the individual to undertake this action, how he or she knew whether the action had been successful, and exactly in what way success or failure led to repeated acts of the same kind (Campbell 1995). This bore problems for constituting a 'theory' of conspicuous consumption. Campbell argued for example, if individuals were considered to be unaware of their own motives and intentions, how would one know which data to collect in order to determine if their findings could count as conspicuous consumption? On the other hand, if this form of was the product of conscious motives or intentions, which of the several possibilities discussed warrant inclusion under this designation? Campbell suggested if this latter difficulty could be resolved, and if a clear conception of the subjective nature of the act of conspicuous consumption could be determined, one might be able, through careful and sensitive interviewing, to establish the context and extent of its occurrence in reality (Campbell, 1995).

However, as an increasingly relevant aspect appeared that an element of the standard of living which set out with being primarily conspicuous ends with becoming a necessity of life, at least in the apprehension of the consumer and in this way became as indispensable as any other item of the consumers' habitual expenditure. Thus, a good part of emulatory consumption was not regarded as intentionally emulative but rather as a result of the habits created by society (Tilman, 1996).

In fact, what made the main difference between traditional and modern societies was not the individual consumer and his or her desires to show off. Human nature had not changed that much. Instead it was the high levels of capital stock accumulation and a productive capacity which could only be made profitable if demand for goods and services run at a level high enough to justify mass production and volume output to the distribution system. In seeking to maximize consumer demand, producers and their advertising agencies came to be particularly aware of the very strong status considerations which could influence the purchase of many

commodities. Advertising in particular came to play the most important role in reshaping the pattern of conspicuous consumption. The visual impact of television worked in a way that advertisers had been able to place their clients' products in a socio-economic context appropriate to status-sensitive markets and they were most effective in doing so. Schor provided an explanation via the mechanism that the spread of television induced people to compare themselves with celebrities and TV characters rather than their neighbors (Mason, 1981; Schor, 1998; Michaelis, 2006). The levels of prestige and social acceptance given to particular products were of special interest to status sensitive groups, but even more in the interest of manufacturers of socially visible products. Thus, they lay heavy emphasis on the real or imagined status of their products if they wished to find the widest possible sale within a particular market.

As a logical consequence, from the producer's point of view, the income constraint on conspicuous expenditures needed to be minimized. To this end, a major development in the affluent societies were the considerable expansion of credit and hire-purchase facilities. The growth of credit linked to consumption were identifies as one of the more remarkable developments in the consumer societies (Mason, 1981). This way the majority of today's corporations relies on competitive manipulations to maximize their own personal wealth and hinder the coordinated running of an advanced industrial society (Mitchell, 2007b).

5. What has Veblen to offer for sustainable consumption research and policy in the 21st century?

We cannot be sure if Veblen would have considered himself an environmentalist. On the one hand he did not directly mention environmental problems. On the other hand he devoted considerable space to the blaming of the chronic waste in industries and societies and gave quite some guidance how to frame an inquiry of the total costs in terms of waste of modern industrial production. By waste in the context of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* Veblen was not referring to pollution and refuse generated from industry or other human activities in the sense of externalities of modern economics; rather he was referring to economic inefficiency and societal consumption patterns. His faith in technology did not stop Veblen from severely criticizing those who applied it irrationally, inefficiently or even unjustly. In this sense waste of natural resources was a principal concern to Veblen (Mitchell, 2001) and he recognized that the colonizing America was not merely an orientation of mastery, but also that of a privatization of the environment. Land presented itself not only as open space, but also as a real estate proposition. Veblen observed the philosophy of assessing the value of land-space as commodity rather than as national wealth (Saram, 2007). Actually, this finds its parallel in the economization of air in terms of pollution rights or to what is recently described as land grabbing. Veblen's theoretical work can be seen as a foundation for understanding political ecology (Wasser, 2007). Mitchell stresses that Veblen's treatment of a consumer-oriented society based on reckless waste by profit-hungry corporations underpins the root causes of environmental degradation and pollution (Mitchell, 2001).

In any case: How much Veblen's ideas and ideals are valued in the context of sustainable consumption is proved in the richness of references to him in recent writings (Schor, 1998; Cohen and Murphy, 2001; Shove and Warde, 2002; Blecher, 2004; Jackson, Jager *et al.*, 2004; Gram-Hanssen, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Michaelis, 2006; Ouédraogo, 2006; Scholl, 2008; Stø, Throne-Holst *et al.* 2008; United Nations Development Programme, 2006; Varul, 2006; Aall, Grimstad Klepp *et al.* 2008; Nemeskeri and Mont, 2008; Nilstad Pettersen and Boks, 2008; Van Griethuysen, 2008).

But what does he has to offer for understanding unsustainable consumption in the 21st century? And what would he suggest how to overcome it? Analysing the full range of Veblen's writings and the rich secondary literature about Veblen, a much differentiated picture appears than in the term Veblen effect suggests. In fact, the so-called *Veblen effect* not even points to a significant problem in the context of sustainable consumption. Nevertheless this conclusion starts with reflecting on this aspect.

It is not the over-spending of money for exclusive goods but the huge amount of cheap mass products which cause environmental problems nowadays, paying a premium for the symbolic functions of consumer goods, on the contrary, may reduce the quantity of material consumption. So this in fact could be a good thing from an environmental perspective (Paavola, 2001).

To a higher extent the bandwagon effect comes into account here as a concerning issue. The comparison with neighbors and peer groups it induces often cause the increase of unsustainable consumption. This is true in the case of many positional goods, such as cars and houses. Competition for status also influences the life span of many goods such as cloth, furniture, household appliances and, again, cars (Paavola, 2001). However, as a concept those patterns of behavior are neutral regarding sustainability. They would be very useful if green consumerism developed as an elitist alternative lifestyle and emulation targeted on sustainable products from organic food to solar energy equipment, or if a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity gained specific status (Varul, 2006).

Where the sustainability discourse somehow gets in conflict with Veblen is the aspect of leisure. What Veblen blames as waste of time and resources is valuable in terms of sustainable consumption: spiritual development, music and art, education and other forms of an appropriate consumption (UNEP, 2001). The only thing that is in line with Veblen in this respect is a wasteful leisure behavior with lots of traveling and tourist venues destroying natural habitats.

Veblen explained how the ecological destructive and wasteful framework in which consumption takes place is constructed. This part represents an absolutely essential contribution not only to environmental and natural resource sociology (as Mitchell suggests) but to sustainable consumption research as well (Mitchell, 2001):

- Unsustainable production and consumption: Market competition and consumer demand are now such that more and

more material goods are being produced, sold, and consumed or wasted, with little thought paid to the consequences.

- Non-local ownership: production of consumer goods and the manipulation of consumer demand are beyond control of most communities due to non-local corporate ownership.
- Socio-environmental destruction: the quantitative shift on work habits and loss of community are contributing to societal and environmental breakdown.

Plotkin points out that instead of borrowing business methods for ecological ends like effluent taxes, pollution rights and tax incentives to secure the environment, Veblen would look to ecological science as a crucial complement to democratic insurgency (Plotkin, 2007).

Veblen is quite emphatic about the point that humans show no proclivity for making cultural u-turns. Once loosened, the machine process linked as it is to powerful institutions of business and state transforms the conditions of life in ways that make simplifying alternatives seem utopian, beyond the scope of possible change. However, in order to illustrate the difficulty which such a radical change in any one feature of the conventional scheme of life would involve, he suggested imagining e.g. the suppression of the monogamous family, or of the theistic faith, in any country of the Western civilization; or of slavery in Africa. Yet, looking from a hundred years' distance we can see 'impossible' changes can be set on the way (Veblen, 1899; Plotkin, 2007).

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