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Veblen, Thorstein. 1899. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin Books

Veblen & Patterns of interaction among the Upper Class: An analysis

The Gilded Age was a time of clear and real disparities. The classes were divided not only economically, but socially as well. The Upper class of this era was a group that shared common norms regarding interaction. The patterns of interaction between the Upper class were based upon a strong tradition of the cultural capital. Cultural capital of the upper class included the manners, norms, and values that allowed members to distinguish each other. The interactions all took place in public, yet exclusive settings. The locations were public in that other members of the upper class must be present at the setting in order to gain social acceptance. The locations are exclusive due to the social and physical separations between social classes. New York at the end of the 19th century was a socially segregated place, with the wealthy living in exclusive neighborhoods.

The rich and the poor, literally occupied separate sphere lifestyle. In describing the patterns of interaction and norms of the era Thorstein Veblen penned *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Thorstein Veblen dedicated his work to the study of an individual's status as it related to their patterns of consumption. In this book the Upper Class and the roles of women and their lifestyle is both analyzed and critiqued. The question being asked is how women of the Upper Class were and their patterns of interactions products of their social standing and what are the dysfunctions associated with it? Veblen had four key terms to describe the consumption of goods based on status, conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, pecuniary emulation, and invidious distinctions

(1899). All of these will be used to further demonstrate the patterns of interaction among Upper Class Women.

The upper class society fostered a mentality of constantly judging its inhabitants. This forced members to constantly one-up each other in lavishness spending. The upper class of the Gilded Age could be identified with their opulence of patterns of consumption. The new upper class developed a lavish display of wealth in their emergence in New York society. Extravagant patterns of consumption, such as the creation of mansions, opera houses, and museums catered to the nouveau riche were created. Veblen wrote spend was “primarily for an increase of physical comforts which the consumption of goods affords” (1899: 25). In analyzing these excessive patterns of consumption, the term conspicuous consumption was used by Veblen to describe any consumption beyond what is needed to get by in life. Any consumption beyond this point was considered waste “industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their substance” (1899:70). Consumption beyond this point was used to comfort the consumer and served no real purpose. All of the conspicuous consumption served the purpose of elevating ones social standing, the more extravagant the more prestige. Everyone has to eat, and parties are social institution, but conspicuous consumption came into play based on bigger dinners or larger amusing house parties. The upper class strived to get their names published on the Social Registry, a whose-who of the wealthy created in 1887 .¹ By doing so they would show their value in conspicuous consumption to their peers in their social network.

The Upper Class of the Gilded Age was based upon their distinctions that separate themselves from the lower classes. Invidious distinctions was coined by Veblen to

describe the barriers that separate the Upper Class from other with the use of capital of some kind. These distinctions are created by the upper class to separate them from the other classes in status. Price is an obvious distinction of in consumption. Individuals of lower class could never hope to afford these consumer goods on their modest income. This allowed the Upper class to separate them self via economic capital. Price is but one side of the disparity between the upper class and the lower classes. The upper class also uses the cultural capital of the social network as invidious distinctions. Manners, belief, and taste, all of these are elements of the cultural capital that is learned in a social sphere. These elements cannot be simply taught to an outsider or emulated; they are walls separating the lifestyles and life chances in class. The rituals of consumption serve no real purpose other than to distinguish individuals of class. Veblen wrote of the social construction of the rituals of consumption, “decorum set out with being symbol and pantomime and with having utility only as an exponent of the facts and qualities symbolized” (1899: 48).

Conspicuous leisure is defined by Veblen to be consumption to show off the status of individuals. The upper class and the upper middle class use conspicuous leisure to show their status to individuals outside of their social sphere. Veblen characterized conspicuous leisure with the lack of productive work, writing, “It is the requirement of abstention from productive work” (1899: 36). A large amount of conspicuous leisure is done so by the upper class women. Veblen viewed the “office of the women to consume vicariously for the head of the household” (1899: 179). Women of the upper class were used as tools to display the wealth of a household, the more grandiose the display of wealth, the greater the status. This tied in the theory of conspicuous leisure, but it also

linked women in as possession of the upper class. Women of the upper class must be presentable at all times. Women dressed in expensive clothing, not for themselves, but for their potential husband. Veblen summarized “the reason for all this conspicuous leisure and attire on the part of women lies in the fact that they are servants” (1899: 182).

Women of the upper class were used as bargaining chips for marriages, their leisure was not really their own. Veblen wrote that upper class women evolved “specialized consumption of goods as evidence of pecuniary strength” (1899: 68). This meant the amount of economic capital available translates into status, based on leisure items. With that in mind, those who had a larger reserve of conspicuous leisure would be high in social status.

ⁱ Cable, *Top Drawer: American High Society from the Gilded Age to the Roaring Twenties*, 34.