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ECONOMICS

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January 2000

NUMBER 17

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This series is registered under
ISSN 1753-2590 (Print)
ISSN 1753-2604 (Online)

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Andrew B. Trigg

Written just one hundred years ago, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] still represents a powerful critique of the neoclassical theory of consumption. In contrast to the individual's static maximisation of utility according to exogenous preferences, as posited by the neoclassical approach, Veblen develops an evolutionary framework in which preferences are determined socially in relation to the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy. According to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the hierarchy. The social norms that govern such emulation change as the economy and its social fabric evolve over time.

Alongside a continuing, though limited, role in mainstream economics [Bagwell and Bernheim 1996; Basmann et al, 1988] the theory of conspicuous consumption has in recent years also been subjected to considerable criticism from outside of this mainstream. Three main issues have been raised. First, it has been argued that Veblen's approach is too restrictive in relying on the 'trickle down' of consumption patterns from the top of the social hierarchy. The pace-setters for consumption may also be those at the bottom of the hierarchy [Fine and Leopold 1993; Lears 1993]. It follows from this position that conspicuous consumption lacks generality as a theory of consumption since it only applies to luxury goods. Second, since Veblen's day it has been argued that consumers no longer display their wealth conspicuously. Status is conveyed in more sophisticated and subtle ways [Canterbury 1998; Mason 1998]. And third, for those writing in the post-modern tradition, consumption behaviour is no longer shaped by positions of social class, but by lifestyles which cut across the social hierarchy [Featherstone 1991; McIntyre 1992].

In this paper we show that these arguments misrepresent Veblen's original conception of conspicuous consumption and take it out of context in relation to his overall framework. In addition, in order to develop a contemporary response to these arguments we examine the possible contribution that can be made using the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the sociologist and anthropologist who has been described as 'France's leading living social theorist' (Shusterman 1999, 1). The link between Bourdieu and Veblen has already been noted in the literature. Campbell [1995, 103], for example, has described Bourdieu as 'the most important contemporary theorist of consumption proper' and stated that Bordieu's main work, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste [1979], 'bears comparison, in character and importance, with Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class'. It can be argued, however, that this relationship has not been widely recognised in the institutionalist literature. For example, the recent critical appraisal of Veblen in the collection of essays edited by Brown [1998] contains no reference to Bourdieu's work. The contribution of this paper is to develop a defence and extension of the theory of conspicuous consumption by exploring the writings of Veblen and Bourdieu. An introduction to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption in the first part of the paper

is followed in the second part by a presentation of the main arguments against it. In the third part a response to each argument is developed using Veblen and Bourdieu.

Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is based on the evolution of a leisure class, whose members are not required to work but appropriate a surplus produced by those who do work, the working class. Once societies start to produce a surplus the relationship between private property and status becomes increasingly important. 'It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one's good name' [Veblen 1899, 29]. A hierarchy develops in which some people own property and others do not. To own property is to have status and honour, a position of esteem in this hierarchy: to have no property is to have no status.

Of course, the accumulation of property can indicate that a person has been efficient and productive – it can indicate prowess in financial matters. But Veblen argues that inherited wealth confers even more status than wealth that is gained through efficiency. 'By a further refinement, wealth acquired passively by transmission from ancestors to other antecedents presently becomes even more honorific than wealth acquired by the possessor's own effort' [p. 29]. The old money held by aristocratic families provides the most status since it establishes the most distance from the work required for its accumulation.

Key to the transformation of wealth into status is the social performance of members of the leisure class. Status derives from the judgements that other members of society make of an individual's position in society and for this position to be established there must be a *display* of wealth. Veblen identifies two main ways in which an individual can display wealth: through extensive leisure activities and through lavish expenditure on consumption and services. The common thread that runs through both these types of display is '...the element of waste that is common to both. ....In the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods' [p. 85]. Being able to engage in such wasteful activities is the key way in which members of the leisure class display their wealth and status.

In principle, people can display their wealth through either method with equal facility – all this requires is an effective network for word to get around about a person's degree of leisure and the objects he or she possesses. Veblen argues, however, that as the population becomes more mobile, communities become less close-knit. In a more mobile society people may be less well informed about the leisure activities in which other people engage, and so the display of wealth through consumption goods becomes more important than the display of leisure.

Veblen labels this type of behaviour conspicuous consumption. People spend money on artefacts of consumption in order to give an indication of their wealth to other members of society. Conspicuous consumption is viewed by Veblen as the most important factor in determining consumer behaviour, not just for the rich but for all social classes. 'The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal' [p.

84]. Each social class tries to emulate the consumption behaviour of the class above it, to such an extent that even the poorest people are subject to pressures to engage in conspicuous consumption. 'Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away' [p. 85]

This search for status through consumption is never-ending. What at one time may confer status may later be acquired by all and confer no status. People must always try to acquire new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others. When Veblen was writing in the 1890s, he viewed this drive for conspicuous consumption as the main force behind the consumer boom that was starting to gain pace in the United States.

Problems with Conspicuous Consumption

Historians have also used the theory of conspicuous consumption to explain the consumer revolution that coincided with the industrial revolution in England during the eighteenth century – not least because this represented the birth of consumer society. The notable work of McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb [1982] looks, amongst other things, at the success story of one of the great industrial pioneers of this period, the potter Josiah Wedgwood. They argue that Wedgwood instigated the consumer boom in pottery during the eighteenth century by persuading members of the European aristocracy to use his wares. "By appealing to the fashionable cry for antiquities, by pandering to their requirements, by asking their advice and accepting their smallest orders, by flattery and attention, Wedgwood hoped to monopolize the aristocratic market, and thus win for his wares a special distinction, a social *cachet* which would filter through to all classes of society" [McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982, 110].

This interpretation has been contested by Weatherhill [1986], who argues that other pottery manufacturers did not take their lead from Wedgwood. Whereas Wedgwood courted the London aristocracy by inviting them to his exclusive showrooms, which were served by London warehouses, Weatherhill argues that other manufacturers used warehouses and distribution networks which were independent from their own businesses. It was this model that was to provide the lead for all pottery manufacturers as the eighteenth century ran into the nineteenth. 'Producers began to rely on a distribution network, and gradually came to rely less on their own London warehouses' [Weatherhill 1986, 212].

It has even been argued that Wedgwood may have held back the pace of change in the pottery industry. Wedgwood's strategy was to court the luxury market by charging a high price, in the hope of eventually reaching a wider market when he subsequently lowered prices. Far from pioneering the opening up of a mass market for pottery, Fine and Leopold [1993] argue that this strategy could have *delayed* the increase in demand. If Wedgwood had put all of his effort into affordable pottery that everyone could buy the pottery revolution may have been more vibrant than it actually proved to be. 'It is at least as plausible to see the luxury market of the eighteenth century as an obstacle to the development of mass production for the lower classes in the nineteenth century, as it is to view it as a stimulus to emulation from below' [Fine and Leopold 1993, 79].

Moreover, notwithstanding the dispute over pottery, Fine and Leopold argue that for many other goods there is not even an opportunity for emulation to take place. Take, for example, the rise in domestic consumption of coal in the eighteenth century – by at least 3 million tonnes per annum from 1700 to 1800 [Flinn 1984, 252]. According to Fine and Leopold [1993, 79], this was made possible by a number of factors, including the cost of production, income levels and rates of population growth. 'Yet it would be far-fetched to view the rise in coal consumption as originating out of the emulative behaviour of the lower classes (with fashion emanating from London as the major domestic market).'

Indeed, for some goods there may be emulation in the opposite direction to the supposed 'trickle down' from the top of the social hierarchy. Drawing from the work of Field [1970], Ramstad [1998, 13] refers to this as the 'status float' phenomenon – 'the tendency of fashionable practices to percolate upward from lower to higher status groups". This phenomenon is illustrated by Fine and Leopold [1993] using the case of jeans, consumption goods that have their origin in the United States as an affordable, strong and long-wearing item of work clothing. Although jeans are very much an American product, and hence may be associated with wealth and prosperity, the point can be made that the social origin of this product stems from working-class consumption. The original take-off of jeans as a mass-produced item of consumption did not take place because of the behaviour of the upper classes.

The argument against 'trickle down' is also taken up by Campbell [1987], who asks how it could have been possible in the industrial revolution for the new capitalist class to overthrow the aristocracy and at the same time emulate it? Similarly, for Lears [1993, 28] 'Veblen's assumption that cultural influences flow only from the top down is not borne out by the historical record'. In relation to fashion trends he quotes Banner [1983] as demonstrating that 'the pace-setters in the beauty sweepstakes were courtesans and chorus girls who were often aped by their social betters [Lears 1993, 28]". For critics of Veblen a common theme is the argument that the 'trickle up' of consumption patterns may be at least as important as 'trickle down'. The theory of conspicuous consumption is argued to be too narrow, with its one-directional focus on the transmission of tastes and preferences, a restriction that limits the theory's applicability to particular types of luxury goods.

In the wake of Veblen's pioneering contribution, changes in consumer behaviour during the twentieth century have arguably rendered the theory of conspicuous consumption even less relevant. The onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s is argued by Mason to have changed the way in which the wealthy have viewed their consumption. 'The long-established, very rich, whose money was now 'old' rather than 'new' and who had been more circumspect in the ways in which they chose to spend their money through the Depression and the New Deal, continued to adopt a more reserved lifestyle as the 1950s arrived' [Mason 1998, 107]. Given the hardships experienced by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy it became no longer acceptable for the rich to flaunt their wealth with such abandon. Conspicuous consumption lost its edge as a means of displaying wealth, with the rich turning to charity-related activities to channel their social and pecuniary activities.

During the post war period it also became more difficult for the rich to distinguish its consumption from the expenditure power of the rising middle classes. Galbraith [1958,

72-3] argued that during the 1940s and 50s: 'Lush expenditure could be afforded by so many that it ceased to be useful as a mark of distinction..'. Similarly, for Canterbery [1998, 148] 'the middle class could now emulate the rich in dress and even in automobiles, especially as the rich downsized to Volvos'. The combination of less ostentatious behaviour by the rich and a high earning middle class has led, for Veblen's critics, to a further diminished importance of the theory of conspicuous consumption.
Taking this critique one step further, it has been argued that for the post-modern consumer the relationship between social class and consumption has dissipated. For Mason [1998, 130], under the development of contemporary capitalism: '"Lifestyle" grew in importance as an indicator of social group membership, and these group identities, freed from the old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups, were secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption'. Under post-modernism there is a 'disaggregation of social structure into lifestyles' [Slater 1997, p. 193], with individuals now free to project their own meanings onto commodities, with personal image more important than display and competition. McIntyre [1992, 55] writes that 'objects and relationships have no firm origin, ground or foundation. Consumption is now the duty of the individual: he no longer exists as a citizen or worker, but as a consumer'. Veblen's approach is argued to be irrelevant and out of date in relation to the new cultural makeup of contemporary consumer society.

A Defence: Veblen and Bourdieu

In response to these critics, two main lines of defence of the theory of conspicuous consumption can be formulated. First, we can look more closely at the way in which it is developed in Veblen's writings. It can be argued that there has been a misrepresentation and over-simplification of Veblen's approach by his critics. The theory of conspicuous consumption is more sophisticated and subtle than the version that has been discussed in the literature. Second, the work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a contemporary development of the theory of conspicuous consumption that builds upon some of the more subtle aspects of Veblen's framework. By examining the relationship between Veblen and Bourdieu a more general and formal framework can be developed in which the modelling of conspicuous consumption forms a part. Each of the three main issues raised by Veblen's critics will be considered in turn.

The 'Trickle Down' Effect

The first issue to be considered is the charge that the 'trickle down' model, that is associated with Veblen, is too restrictive since there can also be a 'trickle up' of tastes from the bottom of the social hierarchy. The problem with this argument is that it takes the theory of conspicuous consumption out of context in relation to Veblen's overall framework. If we narrowly focus on conspicuous consumption, then there is of course a 'trickle down' of tastes through the social hierarchy, with each social stratum emulating the behaviour of the nearest stratum above it. Veblen is clear, however, that there are other conflicting forces that challenge conspicuous consumption.

In addition to conspicuous consumption individuals are also subject to what Veblen [1899, 15] refers to as the 'instinct for workmanship'. Individuals are imbued with a

tendency to admire useful effort and disparage effort that is futile or wasteful. Unlike neoclassical economic theory, in which work is viewed as a disutility, the Veblen individual views useful work as something of merit. 'All men have this quasi-aesthetic sense of economic or industrial merit, and to this sense of economic merit futility and inefficiency are distasteful' [Veblen 1898, 81].

In Veblen's writings there are two ways in which the instinct of workmanship has become subordinated [see Reisman 1953]. First, as society has become larger people are more distant from each other, and so are less able to appreciate the value of work which individuals carry out. The value of work has to be imputed by placing a monetary value on its worth; a development which has resulted in status depending on the pecuniary standing of individuals, which may or may not derive from actual work carried out. Second, the severe inequalities that are associated with the development of a leisure class have accentuated the distance from work of those at the top of the social hierarchy. Leisure has become an end in itself for individuals, an aversion towards useful activity.

This subordination of the instinct of workmanship does not, however, mean that it is completely irrelevant to understanding the behaviour of the leisure class. Members of the leisure class cannot display tastes that are too overtly futile and wasteful. 'In so far as it comes into conflict with the law of conspicuous waste, the instinct of workmanship expresses itself not so much in insistence on substantial usefulness as in an abiding sense of the odiousness and aesthetic impossibility of what is obviously futile' [Veblen 1899, 93].

In addition to acting as an overall constraint on behaviour, the instinct for workmanship also has different effects on different sections of the leisure class. The section that is the most established, both in size and in terms of the distance from work, becomes more sophisticated in its tastes than the less established sections. Indeed, such is its security of position

> '...the latter-day upper-class canons of taste do not so consistently insist on an unremitting demonstration of expensiveness and a strict exclusion of the appearance of thrift. So, a predilection for the rustic and the "natural" in parks and grounds makes its appearance on these higher social and intellectual levels. This predilection is in large part an outcropping of the instinct of workmanship; and it works out its results with varying degrees of consistency'
>
> [Veblen 1899, 137]

There is a possibility, with this outcropping of the instinct of workmanship, for the upper class section of the leisure class to derive its tastes from those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, where more rustic tastes may be prevalent. Although conspicuous consumption is derived from the instinct of workmanship it also conflicts with it. The 'trickle down' model would seem to be unrepresentative of Veblen's own view of conspicuous consumption in which there can be feedback from the bottom to the top of the social ladder.

This type of flexibility is also allowed for in the generalisation of Veblen's approach by Pierre Bourdieu. A key point of Veblen's analysis of different sections of the leisure class is that members of the upper class distinguish themselves from the aspiring middle class because of their accumulated culture. Canterbery [1999], for example, in applying Veblen's analysis to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* [1925], argues that the social upstart Gatsby lacks the necessary culture to win the love of the refined Daisy, who is married into a family of established money. Culture provides a barrier to entering the top echelons of the leisure class. For Bourdieu a key factor to be considered is the *cultural capital* which is acquired at different points in the social ladder.

Cultural capital can be defined as the accumulated stock of knowledge about the products of artistic and intellectual traditions, which is learned through educational training and crucially for Bourdieu also through social upbringing. In a powerful explanation of how inequality in the social structure is reproduced in the education system [Bourdieu and Passeron 1990] the key role of cultural capital acquired outside of education is used to explain the superior performance of children from privileged backgrounds.

Drawing upon this analysis of education, in *Distinction* [1984, 23] Bourdieu argues that the acquisition of cultural capital is 'inscribed, as an objective demand, in membership of the bourgeoisie and in the qualifications giving access to its rights and duties'. The aesthetic taste of individuals with high cultural capital is used to secure positions of status in the social hierarchy through exercising a mark of distinction. 'Taste is an acquired disposition to "differentiate" and "appreciate"... to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction ... (ensuring) recognition (in the ordinary sense)' [p. 466]. Moreover, this process of distinction is more powerful, and provides a more general means of exclusion, than conspicuous consumption: 'The naïve exhibitionism of 'conspicuous consumption', which seeks distinction in the crude display of ill-mastered luxury, is nothing compared to the unique capacity of the pure gaze, a quasi-creative power which sets the aesthete apart from the common herd by a radical difference which seems to be inscribed in 'persons'' [Bourdieu 1984, 31].

To achieve distinction taste is always a negative phenomenon in that it is based on a criticism or differentiation from that which is popular. 'It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes' [p. 56]. A possible illustration of this drive for distinction is provided by recent developments in the market for classical music. Opera, once the exclusive preserve of the upper classes, has entered into the realm of popular music. In Europe the three tenors – Domingo, Carreras and Pavrotti – sang to sell-out open air shows in the early 1990s. By the mid 1990s, however, the Sunday Times [21 April 1996] reported that 'classical music has become the latest victim of middle-class "culture fatigue" and the 'loss of interest by those who regard opera as a ladder for social advancement ... resulted in lower classical record sales and declining concert audiences'.

In the same way that those higher up the social hierarchy will tend to distinguish themselves from those at the bottom, it also follows for Bourdieu that those at the bottom have their own values and tastes. Slater [1997, 163] argues that there are similarities between the instinct of workmanship and the analysis that Bourdieu develops of working class tastes that are governed by necessity. Working class people are concerned with that which is necessary or useful. Moreover, this provides the basis for a theory of popular

culture that resists the cultural tastes of those higher up the social hierarchy. With the consumption of food, for example, Bourdieu argues that working-class households tend to ensure that there is ample available for the satisfaction of hunger. This contrasts with the eating habits of the upper classes that are more interested in treating food as an art form. A working-class household would not tend to be impressed by fashions such as *nouvelle cuisine*, in which the presentation of food is more important than the quantity on offer. With furniture, Bourdieu distinguishes between the fixation the upper classes have for antiques and the more practical requirements of working-class households. And with clothing he argues that working-class households tend to be not so influenced by *haute couture* than the upper classes.

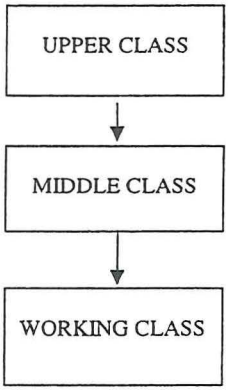
Between the dominant upper class and the dominated working class Bourdieu examines the role of the middle classes, who aspire to the tastes of the upper class, although insufficient cultural capital means that they specialise in less legitimate areas of culture. And, as we have seen, the tastes of the middle class are also formulated negatively in opposition to the 'popular' working class tastes. However, for the upper classes to maintain their positions of status a distinction from the tastes of the middle classes is required, which can involve a return to popular/working class tastes:

> 'The artist agrees with the 'bourgeois' in one respect: he prefers naivety to 'pretentiousness'. The essentialist merit of the 'common people' is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the 'petit bourgeois'. Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of artists and intellectuals, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes lead them back to 'popular' tastes and opinions, the 'people' so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy'
>
> [Bourdieu 1984, 62].

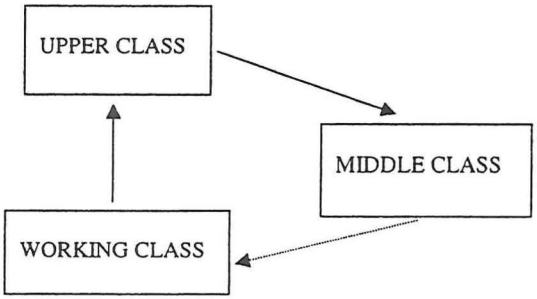
As with Veblen there is, therefore, a 'trickle up' of tastes from the working class to the upper class which allows the latter to outflank the middle class, whose pretentiousness leaves them confused by the way in which popular tastes are embraced. Bourdieu also identifies this phenomenon in relation to the adoption of peasant dishes by those with high cultural capital [Bourdieu 1984, 185] and in relation to folk music and sport [Bourdieu 1984, 209].

Figure 1 compares the transmission of tastes in the 'trickle down' model and the Veblen/Bourdieu framework. In Figure 1a there is a 'trickle down' of tastes from the upper class through to the middle and working class stratums. For Veblen and Bourdieu, however, there is rather a 'trickle round' of tastes, with upper class tastes drawing at times from popular working class tastes and also transmitting to the less sophisticated middle class [Figure 1b]. Instead of a one-directional flow of tastes the transmission is circular, embracing the 'trickle down' effect but also allowing for the status float phenomenon, so championed by Veblen's critics, in which there is feedback up the social hierarchy.

Figure 1 The Transmission of Tastes



(a) The 'trickle down' model



(b) The 'trickle round' model

Note, however, that in Figure 1b there is a broken line to represent the difference between Veblen and Bourdieu over the trickle down of tastes from the middle class to the working class. Whereas Veblen argued that the working classes, although hampered by a lack of resources, are subject to the drive of emulation, Bourdieu develops his notion of popular culture to argue that the working classes are resistant and opposed to the tastes of those higher up the social hierarchy. On the one hand this could be regarded as an updating of Veblen's framework in view of the increasing importance of popular culture since the last century. On the other hand it could also be argued that Bourdieu's framework is somewhat inflexible in dismissing the possibility of this trickle down effect. Figure 1b provides a formal basis for examining the similarities and differences between Veblen and Bourdieu, whilst at the same time emphasising the flexibility of the 'trickle round' model compared to its 'trickle down' counterpart.

The Subtlety of Conspicuous Consumption

As we have seen in discussing the 'trickle down' effect, Veblen argued that the instinct of workmanship places a constraint on the extent to which individuals can be conspicuous in their displays of wealth. Individuals from the upper echelons of the leisure class are subtler in their consumption than their middle class counterparts. Veblen also argues that consumers from all social classes, even the ambitious middle class, are not necessarily consciously trying to conspicuously consume:

> 'For the great body of the people in any modern community, the proximate ground of expenditure in excess of what is required for physical comfort is not a conscious effort to excel in the expensiveness of their visible consumption, so much as it is a desire to live up to the conventional standard of decency in the amount of grade of goods consumed'
>
> [Veblen 1899, 103]

The unconscious cultural force which conspicuous consumption imposes is illustrated by the propensity to buy expensive items that are not even seen by outsiders, such as underclothing and kitchen utensils. The standards of decency extend to all types of consumption without individuals necessarily consciously trying to impress others in their behaviour. Emulation operates at a 'second remove', an aspect of Veblen's approach which in the view of Ramstad [1998, 16] is 'universally ignored' by Veblen's critics.

This unconscious aspect of behaviour in Veblen's approach is also maintained in Bourdieu's framework. The starting point for Bourdieu is the schooling system, where a mythology is generated that the advantages enjoyed by children with privileged upbringings and enhanced cultural capital are in some sense natural. This mythology 'only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture (or language) which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing 'academic', 'scholastic', 'bookish', 'affected' or 'studied' about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness that true culture is nature – a new mystery of immaculate conception' [p. 68]. The advantage of high

cultural capital is not displayed overtly, but rather is interpreted as being due to the individual merit which is naturally bestowed on each student.

Building upon this analysis of education Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus, a theoretical device that is aimed at reconciling the age-old conflict in sociology between structure and agency. Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of 'principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be 'objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' [Bourdieu 1990, 53]. These principles or dispositions are not rules through which the social structure strictly determines behaviour; neither is their unfettered rational action of the type postulated by writers such as Coleman [1994]. The principles which organize people's actions, which make up the habitus, are adaptable over time depending upon the constraints and uncertainties which evolve under different situations, but individuals are not conscious of the cultural force which guides their behaviour.

Lamont and Lareau [1988, 158] note that 'in contrast to Veblen who dealt with conspicuous consumption (i.e. "showing off" which normally would be a conscious act), Bourdieu ... thinks that most signals are sent unconsciously because they are learned through dispositions, or habitus, or are the unintended classificatory results of cultural codes'. As with our previous discussion of the 'trickle down' effect, there is here an over-simplification of Veblen's approach, since as we have seen it can be argued that he in fact also views conspicuous consumption as an unconscious act. Rather than providing an alternative to Veblen, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus can be seen as a formalisation of the insights provided in Veblen's sophisticated analysis of conspicuous consumption. This formalisation of Veblen's approach could also be interpreted to represent a contribution to one of the problems of evolutionary analysis, namely its lack of emphasis on human agency. Mayhew (1998) argues that the debate with neoclassical economics has pushed the evolutionary approach away from a flexible consideration of human agency. By allowing individuals to develop their strategies over time, subject to structural constraints, the concept of the habitus could potentially make an important contribution to developing a 'revitalised evolutionary approach' [Mayhew 1998, 456].

Post-modern Lifestyles

There has been some debate in recent years over the relationship between institutionalist economics, which draws on Veblen as one of its forefathers, and the new post-modernist tradition [see, e.g., Klein 1998; Hoksbergen 1994]. In our consideration of conspicuous consumption we examine a secondary factor in the relationship between the two traditions, namely the analysis of different lifestyles.

Although Veblen wrote his *Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] over a hundred years ago, it should be noted that he did not dismiss the possibility of there being multifarious lifestyles, although he may not have used the word lifesytle in this regard. He came very close, however, referring to 'changing styles' [Veblen 1899, 174] and 'schemes of life' [Veblen 1899, 84]. At one point he also refers to the various 'branches of knowledge': 'So, for instance, in our time there is the knowledge of the dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling, of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic

music and other household art; of the latest properties of dress, furniture, and equipage; of games, sports, and fancy-bred animals, such as dogs and race-courses' [Veblen 1899, 45]. Each of these becomes in vogue at different points in time, becoming 'conventional accomplishments of the leisure class, [Veblen 1899, 45].

Using the concepts of cultural capital and habitus, Bourdieu is able to build a theoretical framework in which the lifestyles of different social groups can be understood in relation to the social hierarchy. First of all, the habitus explains how there can be a grouping of lifestyle elements through particular principles that influence the behaviour of individuals. Second, different types of lifestyles are associated with particular combinations of cultural and economic capital. Lifestyles do not relate only to vertical points in the class hierarchy, as in Veblen, but also cut across the social hierarchy horizontally. This provides the basis for a coherent response to the drive by some post-modernists to reduce consumption to a pluralistic collection of lifestyles, devoid of social structure. Indeed, Fowler [1997, 70] argues that 'Bourdieu's work is best understood as a sociological rebuttal of the history of much crude post-modernist thought'.

The flexibility of Bourdieu's framework in this regard is based upon recognition that different types of lifestyle can gain legitimacy according to the way in which class struggle and competition develops. Moreover, hierarchies of legitimacy for different lifestyles develop in relation to different types of capital. Alongside cultural capital, Bourdieu gives a primary role to economic capital, a general category that includes monetary rewards from stocks and shares, employment and property.

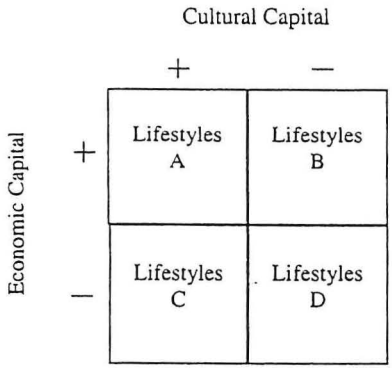
For Bourdieu the intelligentsia, who hold particularly high stocks of cultural capital, tend to exercise high brow tastes, in modern art, classical music - more established and legitimate culture. Those with specifically high economic capital, who lack the necessary skills associated with high cultural capital, tend to exercise more middlebrow taste. In relation to classical music, for example, they lack the social upbringing, which is required for a thorough appreciation of classical music. Bourdieu [1984, 75] observes that 'when the child is introduced at an early age to a 'noble' instrument - especially the piano - the effect is at least to produce a more familiar relationship to music, which differs from the always somewhat distant contemplative and often verbose relation to those who have come to music through concerts or even only through records'.

For those who do not have the right social background to become accomplished in their knowledge of classical music, the area of film may provide a more convenient outlet. As a form of art, film is not as legitimate as classical music – Bourdieu [1984, 87] refers to film as 'not yet fully legitimate' art. Distinction may also be achieved in an appreciation, for example, of jazz, comic books, photography and, particularly for those with high economic capital, in the whole array of consumer goods available under contemporary capitalism.

In addition to those who specialise in either economic or cultural capital Bourdieu also classifies particular lifestyles for those who hold both types of capital in large high and low quantities. Figure 2 lays out a simplified version of Bourdieu's social space in which there are four possible combinations of cultural and economic capital. Block A contains people who have positive economic and cultural capital. People such as lawyers and architects can have both the economic resources for expensive tastes in consumption

goods, and the know-how to appreciate legitimate culture. At the other extreme is block D - the lifestyles associated with the working classes that have neither economic nor cultural capital. For Bourdieu the constraints of economic and cultural capital make it difficult for people to move from block D to block A.

Figure 2 Bourdieu's classification of lifestyles



Source: Rosengren, 1995

The remaining diagonal blocks, blocks B and C, represent the lifestyles of individuals lacking in one of the two types of capital. In block B individuals have positive economic capital. This could be say small business people who make plenty of money but do not show any interest in the arts. Block C, on the other hand, might include people such as primary school-teachers who do not earn much money (negative economic capital) but who perhaps have benefited from a privileged upbringing and tirelessly visit art galleries and attend the theatre.

Over time, there can be cross-mobility between blocks. For example, a family with a small business, but low cultural capital (block B) may channel its resources into purchasing an education for its children who then seek to develop the lifestyle of block C. And, importantly for Bourdieu, another example of social mobility is the 'new middle class' that is largely employed in culture and service industries. Initially low stocks of cultural capital 'gives them an uncomfortable relation to existing taste hierarchies, yet at the same time prompts them to advocate, or at least to be comfortable with, a new and disruptive scheme of cultural distinctions and legitimations (postmodernism), which they can use to further their interests in the economic, social and cultural fields, and which correspondingly enters into the restructuring of the class structure itself' [Slater 1997, p. 160].

On this interpretation the dynamic nature of lifestyles, under what some would refer to as a post-modern society, can be incorporated into an analysis of class structure. The dual role of capital in its cultural and economic forms enables the analysis of changes in different lifestyles in Bourdieu's framework. As Dyke [1999, 194] argues, Bourdieu's analysis of different forms of capital 'is a well-considered decision with respect to a grouping of the causes of a social movement'. The flexibility of this framework allows for individuals to shape the legitimacy of lifestyles as part of their struggle for social mobility, within the confines of the principles accorded by their habitus. An examination of how lifestyles, which might be characterised as post-modern, evolve in relation to individual identities does not, therefore, necessarily involve an abandonment of the categories of social class and hierarchy.

Conclusions

This paper has considered three main issues that have been raised by critics of the theory of conspicuous consumption. Each issue has been discussed by examining the original conception of the theory by Thorstein Veblen and the contemporary contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. First, it has been argued that the theory is too restrictive because of its one-directional 'trickle down' of tastes from the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy. This has been shown to represent too narrow an interpretation of the theory of conspicuous consumption. In Veblen's writings an important constraint upon conspicuous consumption is provided by the instinct of workmanship. In particular, the more sophisticated upper class section of the leisure class is more subject to this instinct than the middle class section. It follows that there can in fact be a 'trickle up' of tastes from the working class to the upper class. Moreover, the key barrier that excludes the middle class is one of culture, a theme which is further developed by Bourdieu. By introducing the concept of cultural capital, Bourdieu also shows how there can be feedback of tastes up the social ladder. In contrast to the 'trickle down' model which is suggested in the literature, a 'trickle round' model can be identified in the original writings of Veblen and the more contemporary work of Bourdieu.

Related to the 'trickle down' issue a second charge has been made that the theory of conspicuous consumption lacks subtlety and sophistication. During the post war period consumers are argued to be less overt in their display of wealth than in Veblen's day. It has been shown, however, that even during his time Veblen recognised that the upper class sections of the ruling class were exercising sophistication in their consumption behaviour. Indeed, for all social classes conspicuous consumption is not postulated to be a conscious act, but rather a standard of decency that provides social pressure on the behaviour of individuals. A formalisation of this approach is provided by Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus, which is a set of principles that influence unconscious decisions within an uncertain and changing environment. This is argued to provide a potential contribution to the evolutionary approach by incorporating the agency of individuals in the context of a structural process.

The third issue that has been raised is the charge by post-modern writers that the theory of conspicuous consumption is too restrictive to address the multifarious lifestyles that characterise contemporary capitalism. Veblen allows for different 'schemes of life' and 'styles' of fashion in his analysis but there is no explicit consideration of lifestyles, which

is a relatively new concept. In addition, Veblen's model looks at these schemes of life vertically, according to different points on the social ladder. A contemporary response to post-modernism is provided by the analysis of different lifestyles by Bourdieu. Using the concept of habitus and by distinguishing between the cultural and economic capital held by individuals a model is developed in which lifestyles can vary horizontally, cutting across the social hierarchy. Moreover, in this framework the social structure both determines and is determined by the behaviour of individuals. Bourdieu is able to analyse the evolution of the new middle class employed in cultural and service-related industries, a phenomenon that has also been examined by post-modern writers.

By looking at the relationship between Veblen and Bourdieu a contemporary response can therefore be provided to some of the main issues which have been raised by critics of the theory of conspicuous consumption. This introduction to Bourdieu provides both a potential development of the theory of conspicuous consumption and an illustration of the foresight and sophistication shown in Veblen's writings over a century ago.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, for helpful comments and suggestions: Ben Cosin, Graham Dawson, Peter Hamilton, Susan Himmelweit and participants of the Post Keynesian Microeconomics Seminar Series. The usual disclaimers apply.

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