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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Mar., 1951), pp. 263-268

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The American Society for Aesthetics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/425888>

Accessed: 28/12/2012 15:35

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## VEBLEN REVISED IN THE LIGHT OF COUNTER-SNOBBERY

ROBERT L. STEINER AND JOSEPH WEISS

To admirers of Thorstein Veblen the world of today must present a confusing spectacle. Veblen taught that high honorific position was attained by conspicuous display of wealth. Yet, a newly rich American is puzzled indeed to find that the more faithfully he follows the precepts of this author, the more difficult becomes his acceptance into elitehood.

Indeed the nouveau is ridiculed for his brisk manner, colorful ties, elaborate dinner parties, rococo decor, and his evident love of wealth and worldly goods. Apparently the reigning elite abhors that very ostentation which, according to Veblen, forms the basis of its social conduct. The nouveau's dilemma is simply this: those very qualities of display which he must adopt to distinguish himself from others who share his humble origins (though not his good fortune) now disbar him from the haut monde to which he aspires. The parvenu will find no explanation of his dilemma in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* which implies an unchallenged, well demarcated elite based on pecuniary advantage.

To Veblen the possibility that the composition of the leisure class can radically change through the loss of wealth of some of its members or the attainment of wealth by outsiders, is not foreseen. However accurate were his observations of former times, they do not apply to contemporary America.

Since Veblen's time members of the old elite have had two bitter situations to face. With the decline in interest rates, the heavily progressive income taxes, and the substantial inheritance levies, a member of the leisure class is hard put to insure his heirs of that wealth and leisure which are prerequisite to a life of conspicuous waste. And equally distressing, success in this respect no longer serves to distinguish him from the rising host of prosperous nouveaux.

It is to the eternal credit of the old elite that it has met this ponderous challenge with an outstanding success. About to be beaten at his old game of conspicuous consumption, the old elite summoned all the power of his waning prestige to effect a most remarkable reversal in the canons of honorific social conduct. For he succeeded in creating and living by a set of mores unnatural and unobtainable to his newly rich competitor.

The new prestige system must be one easily adopted by the old elite and difficult of adoption to the challengers. Just what sort of value scheme can satisfy these two requirements? If an adulation of wealth is now an impotent weapon, perhaps a mocking of wealth will prove a powerful one.

As a result of the long practice of conspicuous consumption, ornate objects have become associated in the common mind with vast wealth. Therefore, if the old elite is to demonstrate a disinterest in money, it must deplore ornateness and adore simplicity. How exactly might this be effected?

Suppose that a member of the old elite were to move out of his house all but the most severe and simple furnishings and decorations necessary for comfortable living, and to outfit his person in a most subdued style. And suppose further that

he were to pronounce that the acquisition of unneeded adornments and the display of flamboyant patterns of china, silverware, wall paper, etc., were actually not altogether in good taste. Members of the old elite, secure in the knowledge that they are arbiters of taste, and now accustomed to and even bored with objects of conspicuous display, are easily able to sacrifice them if this be necessary for purposes of maintaining their social prestige. And finally if it could be shown that this new value scheme of restraint and simplicity could scarcely be adopted by the *nouveaux*, this would hardly inhibit the old elite from embracing it.

Why is it impossible for the recent arrival to adopt the criterion of simplicity in his own furnishings? If he were to do so, he would hardly receive the recognition he craves from his former friends who have traditionally equated splendid living and ornate furnishings with lofty social position.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the newcomer, should he attempt to adopt the canon of restraint, would be faced with a personal psychological conflict. For how is the person, who has dreamed of the day when he could possess objects of material wealth, in part because he has lived a life of privation, to deprive himself of these when they are at last obtainable? Moreover, those who rise financially in our society are generally endowed with an aggressive and energetic personality and it is particularly difficult for such persons to adopt restraint in matters of their personal taste.

The *nouveau* succeeds by his exhibitionism in gaining the regard of the masses, but the adoption of the canon of restraint by the old elite forces him in turn to recognize its superiority. By seeming to value little what is of such cardinal importance to the newly rich, the old elite successfully undercuts the props from the prestige system of the *nouveau*.

For the *nouveau* is made painfully aware that the evidence of material splendor on which he places so high regard and which he has striven so long to obtain, are not highly esteemed in that lofty society to which he desires entrance. The old elite reveals its indifference to ostentatious display, which quite apparently it can afford, by clearly refraining from such display. And to completely demolish the *nouveau* it terms all conspicuous consumption to be not really the sort of thing which well bred persons engage in.

It must not be assumed from the above that wealth is no longer the basis for social prestige in America. One is not able to successfully mock wealth unless it is believed that he possesses it. A member of the old elite, who bought a low-priced car to embarrass the *nouveau* with his powerful new Cadillac, would find his gesture ineffectual if the *nouveau* suspected that the inexpensive automobile manifested—not modern wants—but rather a modest pocketbook. Highest social caste is not a function of money alone, but for the old elite to practice any of several socially effective stratagems, a goodly amount of wealth is definitely required.

What emerges from this over-simplified scheme is three levels of sophistication in matters of taste. At the bottom of the heap is to be found the innocent who naively considers ostentation and conspicuous display to be in the highest good taste even though, and perhaps because, he cannot afford such pretension. On the

<sup>1</sup> Of course the superiority of the old elite is already so firmly established over the multitudes that it need no longer resort to these tactics.

middle rung are the newly arrived whom we may now call the snobs. These make use of straightforward Vebleian technique to exert their hegemony over the mass of innocents. Still retaining their position at the top of the social hierarchy are the elite who, if they were characterized by the processes we have described, may be termed the counter-snobs.<sup>2</sup>

Has the old elite really abandoned that self-confident exhibitionism which was its mark and glory in the past? This we gravely doubt. For underneath the shy, retiring, unassuming ways, and masquerading as quiet good taste, shines forth a distinctive exhibitionism quite as flagrant as the pomp and circumstance of former years. Inverse exhibitionism is to the counter-snob what exhibitionism is to the snob. And does it not serve the identical purpose of establishing and maintaining superiority over those who cannot avail themselves of these devices?

If this is correct, ancient established cities, such as Boston, where an old elite has long been challenged, should be hubs of inverse exhibitionism. While in young and growing cities like Houston where a strong elite group is only emerging, one would expect blatant exhibitionism to be the rule.

Does not the Lewisburg Square society matron who enlightens us with "Here in Boston we never spend more than \$3,000 for a debutante party" crush her lavish nouveau competitor in the same way that the Houston millionaire who tosses a \$50,000 coming out party impresses the mass of his city's innocents? Likewise her son at Harvard by the elbow patches on his sport jacket successfully countersnobs the studied clothes horse whose wealth is of recent origin. And just why is his club, known to be of unimpeachable distinction, so much more shabbily outfitted than the club to which lesser elites may enjoy membership?

On the other hand, those who several years ago chanced to come across the brash advertisements of a magnificent new hotel opening which featured photograph of vigorous proprietor and a not inconsequential list of his accomplishments, doubtless experienced little difficulty in guessing that the edifice had been erected not in Boston—but in Houston.

It is also worthy of note that the concept of counter-snobbery can apply to an old established but challenged nation in its dealings with other countries. Foreigners have paid tribute to the effectiveness of the Englishman's inverse exhibitionism by terming his characteristic reticence and understatement as "an annoying attitude of superiority" rather than as modesty. And that symbol of British aristocracy, the House of Lords, countersnobs by the use of a most plain stationery its lesser emulators who are much given to a display of crests, coats of arms, and regal colors.

One factor in the more complete adoption of the cult of inverse exhibitionism in the United States, as compared to European and Asiatic nations, is the more secure position of those foreign elites. With the protection afforded by hereditary titles, class accents, and the like, foreign upper classes have not felt it as necessary to take refuge in counter-snobbery. Our American upper classes have far greater difficulty maintaining their identity due to the superior economic oppor-

<sup>2</sup> The authors recognize the presence of a small number of counter-counter-snobs and so on. Furthermore they realize that not everyone who behaves in the manner of the snob and counter-snob does so for the motives we have described.

tunity for the common man, the equalitarian nature of our educational system, and the long prevalent feeling that "one man is as good as the next."

What is more, Americans of high birth cannot, as in England, deride the means by which challengers have obtained their wealth. Since the British nobility owe their original financial success to the possession of land, it is not altogether surprising that in England "to be in trade" is to be not particularly acceptable.<sup>3</sup> In America where with few exceptions the old elite has made its money in the same way as the new, such a device could not be used. Thus the American elite has turned to mockery of wealth (inverse exhibitionism) as one of the few remaining artifices by which it can set itself apart.

It is significant that in those parts of the United States where the challenge has been less keenly felt, such as in the old South until the recent past, conspicuous display has not fallen out of favor. Indeed, those exhibitionistic devices which remain effective because they cannot be imitated, still find favor throughout the United States.

As Veblen has in fact pointed out, anything which gives evidence that wealth has been in the family for several generations, may be put to excellent service. Thus today social prestige is attached to a knowledge of extinct languages and occult painters—a craving that an Horatio Alger hero would scarcely have picked up on his way to financial success.

We are now in position to throw some light on the transformation in taste which has occurred in the last several generations. One prerequisite of good taste (the taste of the old elite) is that it cannot be adopted by inferior classes of society. Thus Versailles was in the height of good taste because no one but the nobility could afford such embellishment. Today simplicity is unrealizable by the snob and is for this very reason decreed to be in good taste by the counter-snob. It is all very well for him to admire Versailles as a splendid example of early 18th century architecture, but the counter-snob would be sharply disinclined to utilize gold leaf in his own living room.

Rather, he prefers to draw his adornments from places unthinkable to the snob. Lavish praise is heaped upon the crude accomplishments of prehistoric man whose faded efforts smeared upon the walls of sullen caves are more highly esteemed than the articulate craftsmanship of the master architects, sculptors, and artists who combined to produce the palace of Versailles. Untutored expressions from the lowest orders of society, such as New Orleans Negro Jazz and Kentucky hill-billy ballads, have been elevated to that category of artistic propriety known as "good taste."

If humiliation of the nouveau be the secret motive behind our present canons of good taste, surely it is evident that these motives are not ill served. For what could be more distressing to a man recently sprung from humble stock than to find that the tastes which he must scorn, to differentiate himself from his former crowd, are the very tastes which he must embrace to be called cultivated? This is the real reason for the apparent similarity of taste between the counter-snob

<sup>3</sup> The quintessence of "being in trade" is to be "from Manchester" whose merchants and manufacturers are supposed to excel in all of those aggressive traits which are so challenging to the old landed aristocracy.

and the innocent. The counter-snob is not, however, denied the privilege of paying a great deal for his folk art; he may spend fifty dollars an evening to hear a "Park Avenue Hill-Billy," and a limited edition of South African Rock Paintings is his for only \$80.

Nor is his unadorned silverware, nor his plain Steuben ash-tray, nor Madame's severe black evening dress, to be purchased cheaply. By developing a preference for such "plainery," the old elite has forged its most ingenious sort of inverse-exhibitionism. We may think of plainery as being composed of that category of counter-snob appointments wherein painfully simple design is combined with painfully high price.

Now the delightful feature of plainery is that it enables the counter-snob to have the best of two worlds. The simplicity confounds the snob, while the expensiveness enables the counter-snobs to play among themselves at their old game of conspicuous display—with this difference—that rewards now fall to those individuals who succeed in maintaining the highest outlay for the most austere objects.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, not all good taste is of this inverse-exhibitionist type. There is no necessity to invert exhibitionism when it cannot be copied, and this allows modern art, for instance, to be highly acceptable. Since such esoteric enjoyment is not quickly cultivated, a penchant towards modern art argues exemption from the steady rigors of business life on the part of the devotee.

It is thus not really a paradox that the kingdom of good taste includes very difficult modern art and music, and very simple primitive paintings and folk ballads. For all of these art forms satisfy a basic prerequisite of good taste; that is, they cannot easily be appreciated by the group threatening the position of the old elite.<sup>5</sup>

As against Veblen's scheme in which there existed only two classes, an unchallenged elite and the underlings, we have made use of what appears to be a more realistic description. In this three layered society are to be found counter-snob, snob, and innocent. Although we have employed these tools to probe larger social patterns, they can well be applied to smaller situations and even to individual actions.

For instance in some universities where athletic ability is the basis of the prestige system, we find that the sweater bearing the college letter is of high honorific value. The outstanding athletes countersnob the lesser athlete by a judicious use of inverse exhibitionism. The innocents have won no letter sweaters, the snobs proudly display their letters, and those competitors known for their commanding ability wear their letter sweaters inside out.

In an Ivy League school where high academic standing is much respected, the sons of the old elite, no longer able to compete scholastically, countersnob good

<sup>4</sup> The authors do not know just how much the changed canons of taste have furthered a trend toward functionalism in architecture, but they do perceive that functionalism is admirably suited to purposes of inverse exhibitionism.

<sup>5</sup> It is no part of the authors' intent to sit in judgment on the intrinsic merits of any art form. They merely observe that certain forms are more useful than others for purposes of snobbery or counter-snobbery.

students of lesser caste by a casualness about scholastic marks. It is not by accident that three C's and one D are known in such colleges as "gentleman's grades."

As an example of these mechanisms operating on an individual level we note that there are innocents who never attend French films, snobs who profess wild enthusiasm for these, and a third group, whose knowledge of foreign films is known to be unsurpassed, countersnobbing the snobs by confessing that "down deep they find American films more entertaining."

The particular manifestations of snobbery and counter-snobbery depend at any moment in history on the economic and social conditions, as well as the level of psychological insight that prevails at that time. We have traced the coming of new stratagems in American society since the publication of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Rococo articles of conspicuous consumption have lost their sting as social weapons. Their place has been taken by several new devices, of which plainery is among the most potent.

Exactly what the future holds is difficult to foretell. But if our theory is valid, *there is a self-generating cycle in taste* which works as follows. All prestige systems bring about their own demise. The pretensions of the old elite gradually become recognized (and admired) by the innocents. Then, nouveaux leap to adopt them. Thus pass the reigning canons of honorific deportment, for they have ceased to perform their function of differentiating the old elite from the parvenu.

Soon the old elite become persuaded that the cluster of artifices having their root in inverse exhibitionism are in outrageously poor taste. New mores of elitehood are evolved which mock the old. The new mores need not be a return to rococo ostentation. The only prerequisite is that they be anti-inverse exhibitionistic and therefore well calculated to humiliate the snob of old—now saddled with austerity, plainery, and the like.

We suspect that the old elite will be not without cunning in meeting such situations when they arrive. It should prove absorbing to watch their new stratagems unfold.