

Veblen and Darwin: tracing the evolutionary bases of conspicuous consumption

Georgios Patsiaouras, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK and James A., Fitchett, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

This research aims to revisit the contribution of Thorstein Veblen to consumer research in light of recent movements towards integrating evolutionary concepts from biological sciences. By outlining the heritage of Darwinism to the social sciences more generally, and its impact on Veblen in particular, we aim to discuss how Veblen's (1899) understanding of conspicuous consumption activities in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was underpinned by Darwin's evolutionary theory. We conclude that Veblen can be considered as progenitor for recent evolutionary perspectives of consumer behaviour.

Evolutionism and Consumer Behaviour

Evolutionary biology and social sciences established an unstable and somewhat antagonistic relationship almost a century ago. By the end of the 19th century Spencer's endeavour to popularize and spread Darwinian principles across the social sciences was opposed by Boasian and Durkheimian critiques of universal laws of human culture and social life (Dunbar 2007). Moreover, unresolved and ongoing debates amongst prominent biologists of the 18th and 19th centuries (Darwin vs. Lamarck) discouraged economists and sociologists from engaging their theories with mechanisms of evolution. The scientific establishment of Darwinian evolutionism, which lasted for a period of almost 40 years (1859 – 1900), is followed by a productive stage of research for biologists and experimentalists, until the 1930s, when the incorporation of Mendelian genetics into Darwinism induced an advanced synthesis of evolutionary theory.

Nonetheless, the interest of social scientists in the final phase of the Darwinian Revolution remained low. Concurrently, the climactic popularity of genetic science was overshadowed and stigmatized by the Nazi regime's abuse of genetics (Plomin and Asbury 2005). The end of World War II saw a decline in biological research until the discovery of the structure of DNA and the cracking of genetic code in 1966. Ten years later Wilson's (1975) controversial book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* revitalized the age-old nature versus nurture debate, by attempting to explain how aggression and altruism are underpinned by evolutionary mechanics and the neophyte field of socio-biology constituted a pioneering effort to

synthesize genetics and sociology. The rising neo-Darwinian synthesis of scientific disciplines led to the modern-day branch of evolutionary psychology, an approach that places emphasis on how psychological adaptations influence human mental faculties, such as language and perceptions (Pinker 1999, Tooby, Barkow and Cosmides 1995). These epistemological assumptions have attracted the interest of behavioural scientists and, increasingly, a small community of consumer researchers. Gradually, we find that a growing body of evolutionary accounts applied to various consumer phenomena (Colarelli and Dettman 2003, Saad and Gill 2000, Saad and Peng 2006, Saad 2007, Garcia and Saad 2008, Senior and Lee 2008, Hirschman 2008) - including consumers' emulatory motives and status-enhancing activities - interpret current consumer behaviours as universal adaptations to ancestral environmental conditions deeply rooted in an evolutionary past. This paper aims to trace the evolutionary roots of consumer behaviour in *Theory of the Leisure Class* and to argue that Thorstein Veblen applied both biological and socio-cultural accounts in his quest of explaining consumers' craving for displaying status.

Darwinism and the Theory of the Leisure Class

In *The Origin of Species* (1859) Darwin didn't explicate in great detail the evolution of particular species and especially that of humans. Hence in *The Descent of Man* (1871) and one year later in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin suggested that natural selection prearranges and evolves some psychological functions of the human mind. He also argued that the theory of evolution and natural selection could be applied beyond the scopes of biology and might apply to the evolution of language, moral ideas, cultures and even societies (Hofstadter 1955). Amongst the few social thinkers (Bagehot 1881, James 1897, Ritchie 1896) who followed Darwinian principles in their writings about social and cultural phenomena, we find that Veblen was the last and most influential amongst the social scientists of his generation to establish the basis of a Darwinian socio-economic evolution by the turn of the 20th century.

As Banks (in Raison 1979, 119) notes in his discussion of Veblen "there is no other sociologist of his generation whose words are so often quoted but whose works are so little read." Indeed, Veblen's name has been inextricably linked with the term 'conspicuous consumption', a term which referred to the consumption practices and leisure activities that aim to indicate one's membership in a superior social class. Based on Veblen's evolutionary terminology, we propose the *Theory of the Leisure Class* - originally subtitled *An Economic Study of the Evolution of Institutions* - provides multiple interpretations and deeper insights into human economic behaviour.

A fundamental distinction amongst the three evolutionary stages¹ of a) savagery, b) barbarism and c) modern (industrial) societies is drawn in the first chapters of the classical book. Veblen examined how the rise of economic surplus prompted the peaceful members of savage cultures to evolve into the warlike people who dominated barbaric life. Both cultural and biological accounts of evolution illuminate the gradual formulation of individuals who begin to face increasing antagonism between other members of the group. Focusing on the long-lasting stage of barbarism, Veblen explicated how war and hunting pervade social life and individual ownership grew the incentive of emulation. Booty and trophies became evidence of honour, force and superiority amongst hunters and warriors, whilst aggression was deemed as honorific action. Nevertheless, as soon as the antagonistic accumulation of symbolic property is superseded by commercial transactions, a new stage of development begins for human communities. A craving for evidence of ownership by exhibiting female prisoners was gradually supplanted by the possession and exchange of goods. In the new phase of socio-cultural evolution the 'struggle for subsistence' has been replaced by the 'struggle for wealth' and private affluence substitutes for the good repute attributed to bellicose and competitive activities.

We notice the sequencing of phrases as they appear in the discussion of one evolutionary stage compared to the other. The 'struggle for existence' in savage societies is substituted by the 'struggle for wealth' and 'struggle for pecuniary reputability' in quasi-barbaric/industrial cultures and 'industrial aggression' succeeded 'primitive aggression'. Veblen adopts the Darwinian concept of inheritance and drawing on his anthropological background suggests how the instinct of survival and self-preservation steadily transubstantiates into a habitual impulse to display possessions. Technological progress and the production of surplus contribute to the emergence of the institution of private property during the initial stage of modern industrial societies. The increasing surplus wealth originated an unfamiliar sense of security to modern man, but at the same time emulation gives birth to various novel wants, desires and human motives. Veblen argued that modern individuals revive and release their primitive inclination for distinction through affluence, eye-catching

consumption practices and status-enhancing activities (*conspicuous consumption*). We suggest that Veblen's conceptualization of human economic behaviour lies on an evolutionary platform where the biological proclivities supplement and underpin cultural and social structuring, and vice versa (Veblen 1898). Hence, Veblen's consumer does not oscillate between natural principles and results of upbringing but is a sophisticated amalgam of the abovementioned processes. His evolutionary vision represents an 'open' and sophisticated synthesis of biological and socio-cultural views and its outcome has been a broad rather than a narrow and constricted theory of Darwinian economics and sociology.

The newly emerging lifestyles of the American nouveau riche at the turn of the 20th century included new patterns of expression and distinctiveness through the consumption of clothes, and luxurious items, prefiguring the contemporary consumer system of status in Western developed societies. Materialism and competition among consumers in the 21st century in the post-industrial and affluent societies can be viewed as adaptations of the conspicuous consumption practices which characterized social life in Veblen's time. Over the last fifteen years lavish spending, availability of credit, the increased sophistication of marketing technologies and a desire for luxurious 'lifestyles' has intensified the game of conspicuous consumption (Page 1992, Mason 1998). Working and middle class consumers have been motivated to struggle for a place within educational and occupational elites and to distinguish themselves via ostentatious economic display and status-enhancing activities. Veblen's evolutionary views on the symbolic value of commodities, emulation, and status consumption can provide contemporary marketing theory with useful and diachronic insights into consumer behaviour, desire and experience.

Conclusion

Perhaps, the impact and popularity of the satire upon the mannerisms of the upper classes in the *Theory* obscured Veblen's imaginative and innovative endeavours to explicate some socio-economic aspects of consumption and prestige through evolutionism. Additionally, Veblen's intellectual oscillation between economics and sociology, generalizations and his reluctance to cite his sources discouraged his contemporaries from fully embracing his ideas. However, based on his prophetic accounts on consumerism, Veblen's work emerges as an inspirational and pioneering theoretical approach which assists us to rethink, update and extend the interaction between biology/evolutionary psychology and marketing/consumer research.

NOTES

¹ Possibly, Veblen adopted the historical dichotomies of Henry Morgan's (1877) *Ancient Society*, an anthropological work that proposed a scheme of Darwinian evolution from primitive to modern societies.

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