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# Veblen and the Question of Sexual Selection

Working Paper No. 20

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

**Abstract:** This inquiry seeks to counter a hypothesis recently advanced by Jon D. Wisman; which states that Thorstein Veblen “missed” the opportunity to incorporate sexual selection into his evolutionary economics. To the contrary, I shall argue that Veblen’s vision is not at all lacking and that he intentionally failed to integrate into his evolutionary thinking the animal drive of sexual selection. First-off, I offer an account of Wisman’s thesis and this is followed by a refutation of his argument while making use of Veblen’s key concepts. Tracing the evolution of “conspicuous consumption” to its social inception, I endeavor to reveal the consistent distinction made between biological drives and cultural propensities found in Veblen’s work. Lastly, I shall widen the scope of this inquiry and consider Veblen’s interpretation of the role of science in society, generally, and his place in the history of economic thought, specifically.

**Journal of Economic Literature Classification Codes:** B150, B250, B310

**Key Words:** conspicuous consumption, evolutionary economics,  
history of thought, institutional economics, Thorstein Veblen

This inquiry seeks to establish that Thorstein Veblen chose not to integrate sexual selection into his evolutionary economics. This thesis runs counter to the ideas advanced by Jon D. Wisman; who claims that Veblen mistakenly overlooked the role of reproduction in human societies. It is well-accepted that Veblen was an avid reader and so it is highly unlikely that he was unfamiliar with this process of sexual selection observed in animals that Charles Darwin describes. What is more likely, and what I believe to be true, is that Veblen found little use for sexual selection in his assessment of culture. Despite the hindrance of language and the common comprehension of race and ethnicity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when he was developing his ideas, Veblen's perception of the human condition, his understanding of the development of the capitalistic system, and his ability to inspire critique remain unmatched in the field of economic inquiry. His scholarly work can be measured in volumes and his sarcasm, tallied by the knowing grins of those who understand his messages. It has been noted that in his lifetime Veblen failed to develop a comprehensive theory of institutional change. Yet, a dynamic institutionalist tradition has been gaining popularity outside of the orthodoxy of economic thought and within the wider social sciences realms. This growing appreciation for an evolutionary institutional critique of society promises to build upon the foundation laid by Veblen. My intention is to continue, support, and

further this tradition by deepening our understanding of Veblen's scholarly critique that remains true to his foundational ideas on institutions and evolution.

### **Wisman's Hypothesis**

In "The Darwinian Dynamic of Sexual Selection that Thorstein Veblen Missed and its Relevance to Institutional Economics," Jon D. Wisman (2019) begins with two assumptions. The first is that Veblen's evolutionary economics is based upon Darwin's thinking. The second assumption is that the behavioral proclivities advanced by Veblen are inherently biological and not social and cultural. Despite having listed his own name more times than Veblen's in his bibliography, the author asserts he has made an important discovery regarding Veblen's work. Advancing on his two assumptions in order to develop a theory that incorporates what he believes Veblen "missed," Wisman (2019, 50) expresses his surprise that Veblen failed to integrate the Darwin's understanding of sexual selection into his understanding of institutional change, "as the driving force behind conspicuous consumption...if not the driving force behind all his instincts." From this statement on, it is apparent that Wisman intends to dilute Veblen's astute observations about the human condition into a reduced understanding. And in this manner Professor Wisman proceeds with shaping his understanding of Veblen's work in order to fit a Darwinian narrative of sexual selection.

Wisman begins by briefly describing Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption." The origins of this phenomenon in Veblen's account lie in the behavioral proclivity for seeking status among humans. Considering the centrality of the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption to Wisman's hypothesis, it is curious that he chooses not to detail the developmental stages of this behavior according to Veblen. Instead, Wisman chooses to quote a passage from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] in which Veblen describes the stratified social structure of "modern civilized communities," which lends itself to wasteful displays of wealth at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Veblen (Wisman, 2019, 51-52), "invidious comparison" leads people to emulate the consumption habits of those who are perceived to be of a higher social strata than themselves. This behavior by the emulators leads those who are being emulated to develop a new form of conspicuous consumption to distinguish themselves again from the lower social strata. While it remains important for understanding Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, choosing to focus on his description of modern society alone allows Wisman to neglect key ideas from Veblen and thus, advance a Darwinian interpretation of his work.

Building on his assumption that the behavioral proclivities advanced by Veblen are biological, Wisman adheres to a deterministic conception of sexuality in humans. His assertion is that humans are not exceptional to other animals which

reproduce sexually, that we “compete” in order to procreate. This declaration is made without exception. He then goes on to describe the sexual selection process as it occurs in the animal kingdom observed by Darwin. Drawing from Darwin’s *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* [1871], Wisman presents the intra-sex struggle that takes place between males of many species, striving to outperform one another and advance their genes to the next generation. The resulting attributes attained through many generations of selection are likened to emblems of status amongst the animal species engaged in the selection process. Wisman (2019, 54-55) frames these attributes as hindrances, and often costly expenditures of energy, linking them to the culturally complicated and wasteful displays of wealth described in Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption. The comparison is simple and straightforward. There is certainly an analogy to be made between the display of colorful feathers donned by many male birds and the performance of status in the modern world of human courtship. “Peacocking” is a term often used to describe this behavior. Nevertheless, under the Veblenian framework, these invidious comparisons between humans derive from other means.

Before delving into Veblen’s orientation on the matter, I wish to note that in his theory, Wisman blatantly fails to consider the lives of non-heterosexual persons and proceeds to reinforce a gender binary. It is well-known that throughout history in human societies across the globe, there have existed persons who neither fall

into the category of “man” nor “woman,” and that there are, in fact, a multitude of genders expressed by human beings. This polarization of the sexes into two distinct genders and adherence to heteronormativity is a delusion committed by persons seeking to advance an archaic and ignorant worldview. No doubt it required less effort on Wisman’s part to simply deny the presence of any sexuality which does not seek to procreate. Reducing the sexual expressions of human beings to the biological need to advance the species is inappropriate, much like Wisman’s (2019, 55) clumsy statement on the topic of rape. While he does at least acknowledge the existence of forced sex, I am not so sure he understands what it means. Nor is he likely to understand the opportunity his theory might offer to rape apologists who are known to employ a social Darwinist argument in defense of their supposed right to spread their genes. Considering these grievances, I can hypothesize with considerable assurance that Veblen was keen to the fallacy of reducing human behavior to a single factor of biology.

### **Veblen’s Orientation**

In *The Instinct of Workmanship* [1913], Veblen distinguishes between biological drives and behavioral traits. Expressing apprehension with his use of the term, he nevertheless chooses to refer to these behavioral traits as “instincts.” These instincts, explains Veblen (1994, 1-8) are innately human patterns of behavior

which developed out of the long evolutionary process of the species. While limited by the physical, biological, and environmental framework on which these behavioral traits have emerged, these “instincts” are ultimately functions of human culture. Acknowledging the slow process of change over time, Veblen recognizes that human behavior has developed out of the physiological interactions of pre-humans engaged with the life process. However, he clearly notes the distinction between the behavioral traits his analysis is based on and “tropisms” such as the beckoning of hunger and the need to procreate. Veblen (1994, 26) writes that “the mere proclivity to the achievement of children” is nothing more than a “quasi-tropismatic process” and is not considered important to his critique of society. In the development of his evolutionary economics, Veblen is unconcerned with the animal-like, thoughtless drives that summon us, but with our habitual, institutional, and cultural behaviors. To limit conspicuous consumption to mere peacocking in order to propagate one’s genes would be to commit the error of reducing these “instincts” to the “anatomical or physiological aptitudes that causally underlie them” – and are emphatically *not* the focus of Veblen’s (1994, 4) vision. Darwin’s sexual selection is a biological theory and cannot be accurately applied to human culture. Wisman, it seems, is out of touch regarding the essence of Veblen’s evolutionary economics which acknowledges human behavior as “contra-

distinguished from tropismatic action,” involving “consciousness and adaptation to an end aimed at.”

There is more that Wisman fails to consider. Veblen’s conspicuous consumption is based in his conception of “pecuniary emulation” outlined in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In developing his scholarly work, Veblen (1994, 23) explains how pecuniary emulation was not a part of human societies until our technology reached the capacity to provide a surplus of goods. This surplus eventually came to be governed by a small elite class which all others strive to emulate. Conspicuous consumption, then, could not have existed before the inception of this societal structure Veblen refers to as the age of barbarism – though assuredly human beings were engaging in sexual intercourse prior to that time. The concept of private property evolved out of the age of barbarism in which communal peoples, due to their surplus of goods, became focused on warring with other tribes and raiding their loot. In this process, Veblen (1994, 23-24) writes that the earliest seizures from other tribes were women. Private property, writes Veblen, evolved from the capture of women, and thus the institution of forced marriage was founded. He writes, “the outcome of emulation under the circumstances of a predatory life, therefore, has been on the one hand a form of marriage resting on coercion, and on the other hand the custom of private property.” In Veblen’s development of the concept of pecuniary emulation, the leisure class does not put

its prowess in evidence in order to win mates; its mates are “won” through exploit and enslavement.

The question of sexual selection *is* addressed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, just not in the way Wisman would like to recognize it. Veblen did not “miss” Darwin’s theory, overlooking an opportunity to incorporate it into his ethos or use it to simplify conspicuous consumption; rather, Veblen integrates sexual selection as a tropism into the emergent stages of human behavior in the development of predatory culture. Cultural-sexual selection began to occur, according to Veblen, when an early division of labor was carried out by barbarian societies that was hierarchical and necessitated differentiated human body-types. Sexual selection occurred, then, in response to a cultural change which Veblen argues favored more massive males and smaller females. Yet, this sexual selection process is a derivation not from the tropismatic need to procreate, but from the behaviors and institutions of private property, predation, emulation, and conspicuous consumption.

Additionally, sexual selection is just as much a theory of how genes are repressed and go extinct altogether as it is one in which genes are selected to survive. But as I understand it, institutions are notoriously resilient and resistant to change. Again, an analogy can be made: technology leads to institutional change similarly to the way a “fitting” mutation leads to the adaptation of species. Yet, the

analogy stops here. Genes do not adhere to customs or habits of thought; they are not restricted by “imbecile institutions” which outlive their initial purpose. There is an inherent incongruity between the processes of gene selection and institutional change and a nuance which is lost when this hard, biological science is misplaced and grafted onto the study of human behavior. Equating biological evolution to cultural evolution is a metaphysical mistake which can only lead to the reinforcement of the status quo.

### **On Science**

In “The Place of Science in Modern Civilization” [1906], Veblen is critical of the role that science has inhabited in society. He writes that the atomistic processes of the “machine process” have ushered in a new era of intelligence, and that the unmitigated pursuit for this “matter-of-fact knowledge” has had deteriorating effects for both the ideological and material circumstances in which social reproduction occurs. The scientific way of thinking, according to Veblen, seeks brute facts alone and is unconcerned with pragmatic trepidations such as how, for what purpose, and for whom these facts might be used. This quest for knowledge has become an end unto itself, though Veblen (1961, 4) warns that it is inescapably shaped by the institutions which form and are formed by the customs of society. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these institutions were concerned largely with mass

consumption and predation for pecuniary gain, and they remain so to this day. The grasping at hints of a Darwinian influence in Veblen's work by economists like Jon D. Wisman and Geoffrey M. Hodgson is just one example of the blind faith and reverence for the findings of science in modern times that Veblen describes. Indeed, cementing Veblen's scholarly works together as a scientific theory – as Wisman and Hodgson endeavor – would grant it certain validity in our matter-of-fact era of intelligence: but at what cost?

In this same essay, Veblen (1961, 5) expresses his understanding of the origin of knowledge beginning with biological evolution. He writes that human aptitudes for intelligence and teleological decision-making are “reducible to a product of unteleological natural selection,” meaning that without the *biological* evolution of big brains, humans would not be able to form the intelligence needed to ponder questions such as how to best organize a society. Later in his essay, Veblen (1961, 21) returns to this dichotomy, again drawing a distinction between nature and nurture and poses the question: “How far is the scientific quest of all matter-of-fact knowledge consonant with the inherited [biological] intellectual aptitudes and [cultural] propensities of the normal man?”

The characteristic feature of the barbarian culture has been, writes Veblen (1961, 21-22), one of “competitive expediency for the individual or the group...in an avowed struggle for the means of life.” This struggle for survival forms the

ideology of the capitalistic system as dominant trait of the barbarian culture remains an influential way of looking at the world – even as science does so in search of brute fact. This reference to struggle brings to mind the important and influential matter-of-fact findings of none other than Charles Darwin. Here, I believe I have found a proper place for Darwin’s theory in Veblen’s work: as an example of how the matter-of-fact knowledge of the machine age displays a reflection of the lingering habits of thought of the age of the barbarian in which hierarchy and predation reigned.

Veblen (1961, 27) recognized that “science is a word to conjure with.” There has been, as history has shown, an incorporation of matter-of-fact ways of thinking into many places “where science does not belong” such as in the social “sciences.” Again describing the sway that science holds in modern communities, Veblen (1961, 28-31) attests that the blind acceptance of science for its truth does not bestow virtue. This scientific, matter-of-fact line of thinking which is unconcerned with searching for best practices or normative prescriptions is at odds with the very essence of our humanity. Humanity poses the question: what is to be conjured by this science? Under such a dispassionate regime of thought as the atomistic search for factual knowledge is, Veblen forebodes that humans have “good cause to be restive.”

It remains to be known what economists who call themselves institutionalists like Wisman and Hodgson think there is to be gained by grafting Darwin's matter-of-fact knowledge onto Veblen's scholarly – and at times, sardonically pragmatic – work. It seems to me, a continuation of a trend of which Veblen, himself was keenly aware. If evolutionary institutional economics is to become a superior alternative to the orthodoxy, then let us not allow it to fall victim to the same treatment that advanced Jeremy Bentham's felicific calculus as brute fact, burying the pragmatic of scholarship of the classical economists in a heaping pile of charts and graphs. To reduce Veblen's critique of the social forces of humanity to a scientific methodology would be to deny it the chance to flourish as a school of thought in which the only brute fact is one of change.

## **Conclusion**

This inquiry has sought to establish that Thorstein Veblen purposefully chose not to incorporate Darwin's sexual selection into his evolutionary economics. Through a careful investigation of key texts from Veblen, I have concluded that sexual selection does not fit into his institutional logic. Distinguishing between biological drives and cultural behaviors, Veblen did not consider the tropismatic impulse of procreation to be of any value to his critique. Furthermore, the conspicuous consumption which Wisman attributes solely to peacocking, has its roots in

cultural practices detached from sexual reproduction. This attempt to develop the school of institutional economics as a factual science ala Darwin is on trend with the atomistic advances emanating from the machine process. Academics like Wisman would be wise to consider the detriment to intelligence that can occur when the factory of scientific facts is erroneously believed to produce righteousness when in reality all it can possibly manufacture is what is believed to be true.

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