

CHAPTER 1

The Twenty-first-Century “Leisure” Class

A hand-wrought silver spoon, of a commercial value of some ten to twenty dollars, is not ordinarily more serviceable—in the first sense of the word—than a machine-made spoon of the same material. It may not even be more serviceable . . . One of the chief uses, if not the chief use, of the costlier spoon is ignored; the hand-wrought spoon gratifies our taste, our sense of the beautiful . . . the material of the hand-wrought spoon is some one hundred times more valuable than the baser metal, without very greatly excelling the latter in intrinsic beauty of grain or color, and without being in any appreciable degree superior in point of mechanical serviceability.

—Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)

In the 1920s, Muriel Bristol attended a summer’s afternoon tea party in Cambridge, UK. A number of professors and their spouses were also in attendance. On this particular occasion, the host poured Bristol a cup of tea and poured in the milk thereafter. Bristol protested, explaining that she liked her “milk in first,” as the tea tasted better that way. Despite skeptical resistance from those in attendance, Bristol insisted she could tell the difference. Ronald Alymer Fischer, one of those present, who would later go on to become “Sir Fischer” and the godfather of modern empirical statistics with his famous book *The Design of Experiments*, had an idea. Surely, if eight cups of tea were poured, four with “milk in first” and the other four with tea in first, and the lady identified them correctly then she would be proven right (her chances of merely guessing by chance would be 1 in 70). Fischer, like everyone else present, believed Bristol would likely fail the test. In other words, they believed

Bristol's belief in her tea acumen was embedded in a false sense of aesthetics and taste rather than reality. As it turns out, Bristol correctly determined the order of tea and milk in each of the eight cups.

Fischer's experiment, which went on to transform statistics and modern science (it became the foundation for testing the "null hypothesis"),¹ would not have been possible if not for the embedded status and its accompanying aesthetics in how one drinks one's tea. Milk in first or last has been a sign of status since the Victorian era, as the choice of one or the other implies one's class position.

In fact, the difference boils down to the materials from which one's dishware is made. In the Victorian era, materials used to make lesser-quality teacups would often crack if hot tea were poured into them. Pouring milk in first mitigated the chances of cracking one's cup. However, those with money could afford the fine china that could withstand the heat of tea, thus milk in later was a signal of one's elevated economic position.² Even when the order of milk and tea was primarily a practical matter, it revealed class more than taste. After all, those owning fine china would put the milk in last to demonstrate this luxury. As the butler in the famous British drama of the same time period, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, remarked, "Those of us downstairs put the milk in first, while those upstairs put the milk in last."

Even in more contemporary times, when the quality of almost all dishware is strong enough to withstand hot tea, milk in first remained a sign of social class. The twentieth-century English novelist, Nancy Mitford, employed the term "M.I.F." to describe the lower classes, and the turn of phrase is still used satirically in popular media to describe the working classes or those without refined social skills. Today, the famous English tea purveyor Fortnum & Mason characterizes the choice as a "thorny question," devoting an entire essay on its website to how to drink tea.

How did such a prosaic choice of action, so subtle and ostensibly innocuous, become an amplified sign of class? Throughout time, matters of seeming practicality have evolved into symbols of status. In Victorian England, the displaying of medicines in the parlor was a sign that one could afford to see a doctor and buy medicine. In pre-Revolutionary Paris, the use of candles was rare and expensive, yet even when access to

light (and later electricity) became more democratized, the lighting of candles at dinnertime remained a sign of taste and breeding.³ The same is true for the use of cloth napkins when paper napkins would do (and eliminate the hassle of laundering).

Everything we do has social meaning. Our childhood, family life, income bracket, and concurrent social circles teach us how to go about our lives and interact with the world in big and small ways. Through both behaviors and material goods, we disclose our socioeconomic position, whether we like it or not. As the famous sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed in his book *Distinction*, status emerges from prosaic cultural forms and signs, and most fundamentally, from how we live.

Status has always consumed us. This observation has been made by many before me, and perhaps best by the great British anthropologist Dame Mary Douglas, and more recently by Daniel Miller in his book *Consumption and Its Consequences*. Often the things we acquire and how we use them demonstrate this status to the world. There are obvious big-ticket items—large homes in the right zip codes, sports cars, fine china, and expensive watches. Yet, even manners convey a certain upbringing or way of life—sending handwritten notes rather than email, the way we place our utensils upon finishing a meal, having fresh flowers delivered to our beloved and so forth. Almost all of these behaviors suggest social position and rely on the use of visible goods and the skills for how to employ them in a particular way. Or, as Douglas observed in her book *The World of Goods*, “The goods are both the hardware and the software, so to speak, of an information system . . . Goods that minister to physical needs—food and drink—are no less carriers of meaning than ballet or poetry.”⁴

Similarly, our consumption of goods for status should not be taken lightly or merely as superficial posturing. Consumption is a part of how we define ourselves as individuals and vis-à-vis social groups (as members and outsiders and sometimes both at the same time). We need to see our consumption of goods as an intricate part of humanity’s social system. Just as our work or family structure cultivates who we are, so does what we buy and the norms of behavior we learn. We must see consumption as appropriated to signal things much deeper than what is simply visible.⁵

THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS

Perhaps no one captured and articulated the social significance of consumption better than the social critic and economist Thorstein Veblen. Written in the late 1800s, Veblen's polemic treatise *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is the defining text that precisely expresses the relationship between material goods and status. At the peak of the Gilded Age, and in the wake of the triumphs of the Industrial Revolution, Veblen's work was very much a sign of the times he lived in. He became a leading thinker and popular critic during the Progressive Era, deriding profits and the consumption and wastefulness that came along with the wealth of capitalism. Veblen is most famous for his concept of "conspicuous consumption," the use of particular goods through which status is revealed. Veblen directed most of his critique toward the "leisure class," a wealthy and idle group who vainly and incessantly demonstrated their social and economic position through material goods, many of which were useless and nonfunctional items.⁶

Veblen's theories were met with outrage—he vilified an entire stratum of society as useless and superficial and accused them of almost exclusively responding to social rank and cues. As H. L. Mencken rejoined, "Do I enjoy a decent bath because I know that John Smith cannot afford one—or because I delight in being clean? Do I admire Beethoven's Fifth Symphony because it is incomprehensible to Congressmen and Methodists—or because I genuinely love music? Do I prefer kissing a pretty girl to a charwoman because even a janitor can kiss a charwoman—or because the pretty girl looks better, smells better and kisses better?"⁷

The Theory of the Leisure Class scathingly critiqued the upper classes of society and challenged orthodox economic theories embedded in the idea that people spent to maximize utility of their money.⁸ Veblen confronted conventional notions of how we spend, arguing that emulation and imitation motivated consumer habits, much of which were irrational and wasteful. Veblen's famous example of leisure-class conspicuous consumption is the use of a hand-wrought silver spoon. While, of course, flatware made of other materials or machine-made would be perfectly acceptable and did not look any different from their pricey counterpart, the use of silver flatware would demonstrate to others a particular rank in society. Veblen also snidely observed the use of gratuitous canes (which

implied a man did not need to use his hands for labor) and corsets which, as they were so constraining, meant a woman could not possibly work. Only those of the leisure class were able to acquire and actually use such goods. This particular critique is what made Veblen famous and infamous—and still relevant more than one hundred years later.⁹ *The Theory of the Leisure Class* remains one of the most important books on economic thought written in the past two centuries.¹⁰

While Veblen is most known for his critique of conspicuous consumption, his study of status was far more complicated and in-depth than the conventional shorthand given to his theories.¹¹ Veblen’s overarching thesis is that the recognition of social division and stratification is central to understanding modern society. One’s social position was more important than any value or usefulness a person gave to the world. Ironically, the demonstration of high social position (through consumption, leisure, and nonpecuniary practices) often manifested itself through the *uselessness* of objects and activity. Veblen also observed the phenomenon of “conspicuous leisure”—reading classics at Oxford, traveling abroad, participating in sports and doing nonfunctional things with one’s time, and “conspicuous waste”—gratuitous service workers or help around the house. The ability to use time for something with no obvious productive purpose was an option only for the upper classes. The lack of one’s own utility or the uselessness of one’s goods was the most salient marker of status. In Veblen’s worldview, the silver spoons and signaling of one’s lack of use through canes or corsets suggested that appearance matters more than real happiness or comfort. Like Karl Marx, Veblen saw the economy as a dominant part of the social reality of his time.¹² He believed that the economy provided the fundamental structural framework from which all of society emerged, formed, and interacted. Thus what we consumed, what we had the economic means to consume, and what others observed us consuming, determined our place in society.

One hundred years later, the term conspicuous consumption is still used to capture this particular type of economic and social behavior. But society and the economy have changed dramatically since Veblen’s time and new forms of consumption and behavior have emerged to reveal social position. A century after Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, massive changes in technology and globalization have changed

how we work, live, and consume. The Industrial Revolution and the sophistication of manufacturing both created a middle class and reduced the cost of material goods such that conspicuous consumption has become a mainstream behavior. Simultaneously, the leisure class has been replaced by a new elite, grounded in meritocracy, the acquisition of knowledge and culture, and less clearly defined by their economic position. With this new group comes a new set of norms and values. They work longer hours and for the most part, their meritocracy and cultural values are prized over birthright. As modern capitalism opened the floodgates to material consumption, it has also brought about increasing inequality.¹³ But the distance across classes is not simply defined by the stuff people own. These changes have transformed the dynamics of work, leisure, how we consume, and how our consumption is linked to status. Despite the seeming “democratization of luxury,” to quote Daniel Boorstin, the twenty-first century has brought greater socioeconomic inequality than ever before, further distancing the elites from the rest.

All of these various changes in society and the economy challenge and change the meaning and attainment of status and consumption in the twenty-first century. What does consumption look like today and how has it changed over the past several decades? How do our gender, race, profession, and where we live impact what we buy? If acquisition of material goods is now fairly accessible to all, how do wealthy elites maintain their status? And if Veblen stepped into the twenty-first century, what would he say? This book is about those changes and how they have impacted the way we spend money, the way we spend time, and how we reveal our status in big and small ways.

But first, let’s look at how status has always been central to human civilization.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION THROUGHOUT HISTORY

While conspicuous consumption may feel like a truly capitalist, post-Industrial Revolution spectacle, humans have been engaging in the status wars since the beginning of human civilization. Veblen believed that

much of what he observed at the turn of the twentieth century emerged in prehistoric times.¹⁴

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s study of ancient Roman society demonstrates that conspicuous consumption was alive and well prior to AD 79. The less well-off emulated the higher social class, many thousands of years before the arrival of flat screen TVs and cheap monthly car payments that obfuscate current class lines. In his archeological study of early Pompeii and Herculaneum homes, ranging in size and number of rooms, he finds that “the same status markers that are found in the grandest homes also occur, albeit more rarely, in quite small units.”¹⁵ For example, Wallace-Hadrill points out that decoration, a very basic symbol of status, was displayed by the wealthy in their homes and imitated by the poor, even when they had little space or means to do so. Later, during the Roman Empire or the Imperial period, as Rome became wealthier and more powerful, the prevalence of decoration was greater and more democratic. The habits of the rich were imitated more consciously by aspirational plebeians. And yet, at the same time, Wallace-Hadrill observes that as the lower classes attained access to forms of decoration, the differences in quality between that which the elites and the less wealthy displayed became much greater, suggesting that the elites used rare materials or unusual methods as a way to establish their standing, as conspicuous goods on their own would no longer signify status. For example, mosaics were difficult to create, impossible to fake, and arduous to execute without the right skills and materials, and thus remained a rare marker of elite status. The use of glass windows such as bay windows and stained glass in Victorian England’s upper-class houses also exemplifies the use of scarcity to reveal status.¹⁶ These upper-class homes drew their architectural aesthetics from England’s grand estate mansions.

The use of decoration to suggest and imitate status continued throughout Europe in the seventeenth century. Under the Dutch Empire, two-thirds of Delft households possessed at least one painted canvas—a decoration that initially marked elite status and was then imitated by the less wealthy. In pre-Revolutionary France, the middle class emulated the aristocrats by using wallpaper designed to look like palace tapestries,¹⁷ stucco employed to mimic marble, and porcelain disguised as gold. One could even pretend to have a library by installing fake book spirals on

the wall.¹⁸ Women imitated Marie Antoinette's hairstyle as an effort to be closer to royalty.¹⁹ Almost a century later, Victorian England's courtiers' silk stockings were quickly imitated by the working class in the form of worsted stockings—again, using cheaper materials but with the same effect.²⁰

Undoubtedly all of these examples demonstrate imitation in the aspirational sense—lesser quality versions of the elite's goods intended to communicate status. In these historical cases as in those of the current day, whether knockoff Louis Vuitton or fake wood floors, the difference is barely discernable to the naked eye. The observation of AD 79 remains the same as it was in Veblen's time and today: "Of course, there is a great gulf between the luxury of the elite houses and the simpler aspirations of the small," writes Wallace-Hadrill. "But what matters is to understand that they do not belong to different cultural universes."²¹ (Today, one can even get linoleum that mimics marble, not a far cry from stucco's purpose in pre-Revolutionary France.) In short, from the beginnings of documented human civilization, a desire to demonstrate status, or to imitate and assimilate with high social classes, is evident. Or, as Wallace-Hadrill remarked to me in an interview, "We can utterly confirm that conspicuous consumption occurred in pre-capitalist society. It's quite a quaint point of view to see it as capitalist."

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION GOES MAINSTREAM: MASS PRODUCTION AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

While capitalism may not be responsible for conspicuous consumption, it is true that the Industrial Revolution opened the floodgates of consumption to the common man. The prosperity brought by the Industrial Revolution was seemingly egalitarian, offering wealth to a whole new stratum of society—a middle class. While it took almost a millennium and a half for world income to double prior to the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution and modern capitalism brought that same doubling in just 70 years in the nineteenth century and then again in just 35 years in the twentieth century.²²

Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the creation of the steam engine, many objects were only affordable for the truly wealthy. Items like

sewing machines and typewriters (Victorian versions of electronics) were still unavailable for the masses. London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 displayed many of the luxury objects of the burgeoning industrial world, such as Morris wallpaper and pianos, but they were relegated to the wealthy.²³ As mechanization and specialization enabled the production of a great number of goods, it became possible to distribute authentic consumer items to this growing middle class. Imitation was no longer the only conduit by which to get closer to the elite. Instead, through both mass production and fast credit (a development from the latter half of the twentieth century), many more people began to consume the same products as elites.

In Veblen’s time the elite leisure class owned property, and controlled the means of production and the means to acquire material goods. The Industrial Revolution brought massive economic restructuring and the introduction of a middle class of businessmen and workers. These new workers were unlike the landless proletariats before them who were oppressed under the noble class. In the ensuing decades, the middle class, not just the upper tiers of society, acquired property, and generated wealth and disposable income that allowed them to purchase status through consumption. By the early twentieth century the middle class bought cars thanks to the constantly growing American automobile industry (first the Model-T, then Chevys and Cadillacs). By the 1950s, many owned suburban homes through the GI Bill and Federal Housing Authority. New technologies and rapid production manufacturing techniques allowed this middle class to acquire TVs, air conditioning units, and stereos as they were all being produced at greater speed and lower cost.

Today, conspicuous consumption is so commonplace that it has become synonymous with overly showy goods, whether BMWs or Louis Vuitton handbags, that convey a sense of wealth and higher social position. The nouveau riche are particular culprits, but so are the rising upper middle classes and oligarchs of Russia and China. Some scholars even argue that the poor engage in the practice more than the rich.²⁴ In *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith himself observed that because so many people could afford luxury expenditures, such goods were no longer a mark of distinction. In fact, the display of wealth was deemed “passé” to a point that conspicuous consumption was no longer

associated with the very wealthy, but rather with everyone else. Indeed, in *The Power Elite*, Galbraith's contemporary C. Wright Mills observed that the absence of an American aristocracy meant that possessors of money—"sheer, naked, vulgar"—were given entrance everywhere, thus forcing the truly elite to find more implicit marks of status than wealth and consumption habits.

Another force at work in the proliferation of contemporary conspicuous consumption is the increased awareness of the lifestyle of elites. In the early nineteenth century, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were photographed in their homes amidst their household goods. The rise of advertising in the late 1800s further spread the images of lifestyles to aspire to, and thereby cultivated a new middle-class consumer economy.²⁵ In the latter half of the twentieth century, Princess Diana's luxury lifestyle was on display throughout numerous magazines worldwide.

In America, which has always had a democratic view of its rich, the wealthy were often thought of as accessible, rags-to-riches Horatio Alger types. Even old East Coast society, while shrouded in more mystery than its Californian counterparts, paraded about New York and Boston, as captured by the writings of Edith Wharton, Dominick Dunne, Truman Capote, and Tom Wolfe. Today, our media and celebrity tabloids document every house, pair of shoes, diamond ring, and restaurant of our Hollywood aristocracy. After all, American high society has never comprised aristocrats or hundreds of years of birthright social position, thus making its superiority mainly one of wealth. The access to information about elite lifestyle made the average man hungry for more (and instilled the belief he could attain it). This entrée coupled with cheaper consumer goods made it possible. Conspicuous consumption was no longer confined to the echelons of the elite.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

The label-consciousness of the late nineties and early noughties is perhaps best captured by one of the era's most popular television programs, *Sex and the City*, which documented a time when a gleaming Rolex watch, or a pair of Louboutin shoes, identifiable by their signature red

soles and pencil-thin stiletto heels, signaled a certain position in society. Similarly, wealth was displayed through the luxury markets of Armani, Ralph Lauren, and Oscar de la Renta, and the masses emulated through the purchase of knockoff Gucci sweatshirts from New York City’s Times Square. The signature charging polo player embroidered on a golf shirt or crisp white button-down shirt signaled that the wearer had spent quite a lot of money on a commonplace good that was *clearly* of superior quality—a twenty-first-century example of Veblen’s silver flatware. Sure, the fake Prada handbags would, at times, fool even the most discerning eye, but real luxury—the actual luxury handbags, Lauren golf shirts, and Armani dresses—was still out of reach of the masses, both in terms of cost and exclusiveness. Their status rested on the aggressive logos emblazoned across the item, the bigger the better. You knew it was a Prada handbag because the shiny black and silver triangle placed overtly on every bag said it was so. The luxury logo was the leitmotif for the era’s over-the-top glamour, the rise of Wall Street money, and *nouveau riche*.

But these earlier eras of logos and luxury excess undoubtedly created a hunger among the masses—and it was slowly being satiated. In just a few years between the mid-1990s and the 2000s, a number of brands established what are called “diffusion lines”—that is, authentic clothing and accessories produced by the fashion house at a much lower and affordable price point. The most prominent of these brands emerged in a flurry—Armani’s Armani Exchange (A/X) (1991), Ralph Lauren’s Polo (1993), and Marc by Marc Jacobs (2001). While linens and housewares were also being produced by diffusion lines (Laura Ashley, Ralph Lauren), clothing was particularly pivotal in this transformation and democratization of conspicuous consumption. To that end, mass-produced luxury clothing of a different sort began appearing in shopping malls and downtown centers—Banana Republic was purchased by Gap in 1983 and rebranded as upscale classic clothing. J.Crew, formally a clothing catalogue company known as Popular Club Plan, renamed itself and opened a retail store in 1989, positioning itself as a less expensive version of Ralph Lauren. These efforts to bring luxury to the mass market have been met with unabashed demand: A/X boasts 270 stores in 31 countries, while J.Crew has 287 stores and \$2.5 billion in revenue. Ralph Lauren has 460 stores and \$7.4 billion in sales, and The Gap has opened 3,700 stores worldwide.²⁶

By global standards, these diffusion lines and mainstream luxury clothing lines are still expensive. One is not likely to spend less than \$100 (and often much more) on a single item at Banana Republic. Yet, the cost of these clothing items is significantly less than the original luxury lines and they convey very similar aesthetics—the crisp blue-blood look of Ralph Lauren or quirky preppiness of Kate Spade is easily imitated by Banana Republic or J.Crew. Marc by Marc Jacobs products may not be made with the same tailoring or quality of materials as the flagship brand, but they do capture the bohemianism and subversiveness that has made the designer so celebrated and revered.

The increase in online shopping has also had a profound impact on consumer access to coveted brands. Once upon a time, if you lived in small-town Kansas or Missouri you needed to visit a major city to obtain high-end fashion. Today, a simple click on Sak's Fifth Avenue's website will send a pair of Manolo Blahnik's "BB" shoes to any woman in the country, provided she's willing to spend \$600 for the privilege. Additionally, the web enables luxury brands to distribute items from their past seasons to various discount fashion sites. Apparel and shoes websites such as Bluefly (1998), Zappos (1999), Overstock.com (1999), and of course the original bargain-hunting virtual mecca, Ebay (1995), allow mainstream consumers to engage in conspicuous consumption at blue-light special prices. Some more recent additions to this group include Gilt (2007) and Rue La La (2007), which offer luxury goods from Cartier watches to Chanel handbags at shockingly reduced prices through their "flash sales," in which an Hermès handbag will be reduced from \$20,000 to \$10,000 and La Perla lingerie is 60% off for a limited time (sometimes hours or a day or so). Admittedly these are not inexpensive items, irrespective of the sale. Rent-the-Runway, established in 2009 by two Harvard wunderkinds, allows women to rent high-end designer dresses for a fraction of the price, the price of which includes a free back-up size shipped with compliments. Although just a temporary fix, this company provides women luxury items for the events that matter, even if most could never afford to actually purchase the gowns.

The desire for branded goods has created an expanded market that extends beyond the upper class for which it was intended. Target now teams up with high-end designers to create affordable Missoni, Lily Pulitzer, and Proenza Schouler, while Kohls, Macy's, and Kmart sell celeb-

rity brands meant to imbue the consumer with a sense of Kim Kardashian, Jessica Simpson (or some other celebrity’s) sense of style. Rolex’s Tudor line is a more affordable version of the watch (only available in Europe). As cars go, the Volkswagen Group is the master at creating different price points for versions of the same thing. Or, as one car aficionado remarked, “The Lamborghini Gallardo was basically the Audi R8. The Audi A3 is the Golf which is the Seat Leon. VW Group has become very smart at identifying the things that make a difference to their customers . . . so Audi people will pay for a ‘Golf in a frock’ because they don’t see it as that. They [The consumers] like better plastics, polished aluminum, etc.”

Globalization, mass marketing, mass production, and knockoffs have created a conspicuous consumption profile for many more people. This deluge of material goods would suggest that the barriers to entry into upper-class conspicuous consumption have been all but eradicated. The “stuff” once associated with a wealthy lifestyle—cars, multiple handbags, closets full of clothes—is seemingly accessible to mainstream society. At first blush, conspicuous consumption has been democratized.

THE BACKLASH

This is not to say there hasn’t been a backlash to the democratization of conspicuous consumption. In the late 1990s, in an effort to gain more market share, Burberry’s famous checked plaid, found on the inside of its tailored but old school trench coats, began to appear on many other goods, including umbrellas, wallets, and cell phone cases. The new-found ubiquity of the plaid (dubbed “chav check,” a pejorative) reduced Burberry from the uniform of English aristocrats to an ironic, reinterpreted badge of youth subculture. Emblazoned across scarfs, ties, and hats, counterfeit versions began showing up on the black market and being coopted by “chavs,” an insulting term used to describe the working-class youths of Britain who had a penchant for knockoff designer logo-tastic goods, or whom the *Economist* called “the stereotypical white working-class delinquent looking for trouble.”²⁷ The re-appropriating of Burberry’s status by this group caused a public relations nightmare for the company by alienating their core consumer base, who enjoyed

the staid subtleness from which the company had not deviated since the mid-1800s. Only in the 2000s, when Rosie Marie Bravo and Angela Ahrendts (the former CEOs, respectively) and current CEO and chief creative officer Christopher Bailey took the helm and re-envisioned the brand (less plaid, more military references) did Burberry finally recover its lost sales.²⁸ Not only did Burberry scale back on all that plaid, but Bailey created magnificently tailored clothing using unique materials and design that were both incredibly expensive in their own right but also very difficult to imitate. For example, Bailey's multi-thousand-dollar Warrior bag, replete with large metal armor and studs, would be almost impossible to successfully knock off.

In a world where almost everything (except perhaps a Burberry Warrior bag) can be imitated or accessed for a lesser price, how has the status game shifted for the new elites? Without question, even in the aftermath of the Great Recession, wealthy people are getting richer all the time, and they use this wealth to buy things that are not even possible to imitate. Simon Kuper, who writes about some of these questions for the *Financial Times*, recently explained to me that the upper class now maintains its exclusivity by attaining limited edition versions of goods. Whether artisanal cheeses or limited vintages of wine or Ferraris—regardless of the price point—the item in question accrues status by virtue of simply being scarce rather than merely expensive. In Europe, where manufacturers are having trouble selling mass-market \$15,000 cars, Ferraris, starting at \$275,000 are going like gangbusters.²⁹

THE EROSION OF THE LEISURE CLASS, THE RISE OF THE ASPIRATIONAL CLASS

Not only has the democratization of conspicuous consumption changed the landscape, so too has the erosion of the leisure class. Other than the odd trust fund playboy or oligarch's debutante, the leisure class no longer exists. Many of the individuals who are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on designer goods have made their own money—many through legitimate hard work (and, admittedly, others less so). The disappearance of a wealthy, idle aristocracy and the rise of an educated, self-made elite (what some call a meritocratic elite) means that “leisure”

is no longer synonymous with our upper classes. But there is a cost to this more egalitarian version of status. According to work done by Cornell University economist Robert Frank, there is a measurable decline in leisure and happiness among the wealthy. “In fact, while income inequality may be growing, ‘leisure inequality’—time spent on enjoyment—is growing as a mirror image” writes Frank, “with the low earners gaining leisure and the high earners losing.”³⁰ From 1985 to 2003, wealthy men lost leisure hours, decreasing from 34.4 to 33.2 hours per week, while less wealthy men saw an increase from 36.6 to 39.1 over the same time period. While the same pattern is consistent for women, high-earning women lost even more leisure time—a 2-hour decline over the study period.³¹ In his book *Changing Times: Work and Leisure in Postindustrial Society*, Jonathan Gershuny observes that, unlike in Veblen’s time, the top socioeconomic groups have less time, not more, and these two variables, work and leisure, have a “reciprocal relationship”—time is influenced by production and the work required for these new forms of highly valued production. Today abundance of leisure no longer indicates higher status.³²

These statistics might imply choice, but the larger economic restructuring of the global economy from Veblen’s time to the present day suggests much less agency on the part of both the rich and the poor. The manufacturing economy provided a means by which social mobility could be acquired through income rather than birthright or landownership. In fact, the income derived from factory jobs, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century, enabled a broad swath of the population to acquire property and houses of their own, along with the consumer items, whether armchairs or curtains, with which to fill them. Through the 1960s, many middle-class families were able to live materially prosperous lives derived from their relatively highly paid factory and management jobs. In many instances, college degrees (let alone professional or graduate degrees) were not required to do economically well. In 1950, for example, only 7.3% of all males had a college degree. By 1962, the rate was just higher than 11% of all males (female rates were lower in both instances). Contrast these statistics with 2014, when almost a third of both men and women had college degrees.³³ In the mid-twentieth century, social and economic mobility was significantly tied to individuals’ loyalty to their institutions. During this era, institutional

loyalty (e.g., working 40 years for Ford Motor Company or General Electric) was associated with ongoing promotion, raises, and the compensation to support a middle-class consumer lifestyle. People were valued, not for their Ivy League degree or desirability by competitors, but rather for their steady devotion to the institutions for which they worked and which supported them—the military, the government, companies, and unions. C. Wright Mills’s conception of the “power elite” draws heavily from the fact that these institutions were the nexus of control in the economic and social landscape. Significant critique of this economic structure emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, most famously William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956) which found the collective, group think of corporate America a stifling attack against individualism and creativity. Workers’ ties to their organizations triumphed over their own ideas and ambitions, and yet, to Mills’s point, this loyalty was rewarded and it paved a path for ongoing mobility. The classic film *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) and more recently the TV series *Mad Men*, were popular mainstream depictions of how this relationship played out.

The collapse of the manufacturing economy changed the currency of social and economic mobility quite considerably. Deindustrialization of Western economies (particularly within the United States and Great Britain) is largely explained by three key forces: oversaturation of the market (there are only so many dishwashers a household can buy), technology and automation (machines are low-cost and faster than people when it comes to factory lines), and globalization (labor costs are cheaper elsewhere and technologies in transport along with computers make it possible to outsource production to Southeast Asia or South America).³⁴ As a result, those well-paying factory jobs that defined the good life in the United States disappeared quickly. In 1970, a quarter of the American workforce was employed by the manufacturing sector. By 2005, that figure had dropped to 10%.³⁵ The numbers are not just statistically surprising; embedded in the reduction of manufacturing is the social and economic contract made with the middle class. These jobs were well-paid but relatively unskilled, thus many members of America’s middle class achieved prosperity, material comfort, and economic and social security without birthright, and, antithetical to the current formula for upward mobility, without a college degree. The hemor-

rhaging of these factory jobs to developing countries and the closing up of factory shops meant that this stable middle class had lost its means for survival. Deindustrialization brought erosion to major urban centers (where many factories were located) and joblessness throughout huge swaths of the country.³⁶

In manufacturing’s place came the rise of the service economy, a truly bifurcated economic structure. Globalization manifested itself in the outsourcing of cheap labor for manufacturing but also through the emergence of elite “global cities,” to use Saskia Sassen’s term. Global cities became the sites for the new economic means of production—information and financial capital. The labor market elites responsible for the greatest profit-making were found in professional sectors—accountancy, finance, law, and medicine, or what Sassen calls “high level producer services.” Another account of this economic restructuring offers a similar but simpler explanation: The global economy had moved from producing widgets to producing ideas—those who were responsible for generating those ideas, what Robert Reich has called “symbolic analysts”³⁷ or Richard Florida has termed the “creative class”—are the winners in the new economy.³⁸

While a college degree is not an explicit measure of membership to Sassen’s, Reich’s, or Florida’s categorization, it certainly helps and most members do possess one. Thus the rise of an economy dependent on innovation and knowledge is also one dependent on professional skills, many of which are acquired through education. Mobility into the top echelon of the new world order is reliant on acquisition of knowledge, not birthright, not property held for generations, and not, sadly for many, loyalty to one’s work institution. But these new elites are not simply members of an economic group tied to one another by their financial success. They are not plutocrats or necessarily on top of the economic pyramid. Many who have acquired education and prize knowledge are indeed affluent labor market elites, but plenty are not. For this new class of people, knowledge is prized independently of its economic function. For bankers, lawyers, or engineers in this group, their education and specialized knowledge have enabled them to attain upward mobility in the world economy. But in general, those who have obtained knowledge—those with creative writing degrees from Yale, screenwriters who have yet to sell a screenplay, musicians and Teach for America volunteers—

are also members of this new cultural and social formation. Instead of income level, this new group is tied by a *shared set of cultural practices and social norms*. The unifying characteristic shared by members of this new elite cultural formation is their acquisition and valuing of knowledge, rather than their income level. They use knowledge to attain a higher social, environmental, and cultural awareness. The process by which they obtain knowledge and subsequently form values is what reveals social position. This new group is thus defined, more than anything else, through its shared cultural capital—they speak the same language, acquire similar bodies of knowledge, and share the same values, all of which embody their collective consciousness. Reading cultural commentary, being up-to-date on the news (preferably via the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, or *Financial Times*), and eating organic food are but a number of ways by which they connect with one another irrespective of their economic means. And there is a well-intentioned goal behind these efforts: The knowledge and cultural capital are used to make informed decisions around what to eat, how to treat the environment, and how to be better parents, more productive workers, and more informed consumers.

This new, dominant cultural elite can be called, quite simply, the *aspirational class*. While their symbolic position sometimes manifests itself through material goods, mostly they reveal their class position through cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and value system—dinner party conversation around opinion pieces, bumper stickers that express political views and support for Greenpeace, and showing up at farmer’s markets. These behaviors and signifiers imply aspirational class values and also suggest the knowledge acquired to form them. Today’s aspirational class prizes ideas, cultural and social awareness, and the acquisition of knowledge in forming ideas and making choices ranging from their careers to the type of sliced bread they purchase at the grocery store. In each of these decisions, big and small, they strive to feel informed and legitimate in their belief that they have made the right and reasonable decision based on facts (whether regarding the merit of organic food, breast-feeding, or electric cars). In short, unlike Veblen’s leisure class or David Brooks’s “bobos,” this new elite is not defined by economics. Rather, the aspirational class is formed through a collective consciousness upheld by specific values and acquired

knowledge and the rarified social and cultural processes necessary to acquire them.

In *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks chronicled the cognitive dissonance of “bobos” (bohemian bourgeois) who grew up in the counter-culture 1960s and felt a deep discomfort around their adulthood wealth. This group is also an economically based elite, or what Brooks called “the new upper class.” The uneasiness many bobos felt in reconciling their hippy, nonmaterialistic earlier years and their newfound wealth resulted in consumer habits that were still expensive but ultimately attempted to distance themselves from money. In an attempt to transcend materialism, the rich bobos buy Subzero brand fridges and remodel their bathrooms with slate walls and a Zen aesthetic (but they still need to have a lot of money to do so). “It’s virtuous to spend \$25,000 on your bathroom, but it’s vulgar to spend \$15,000 on a sound system and a wide-screen TV. It’s decadent to spend \$10,000 on an outdoor Jacuzzi but if you’re not spending twice that much on an oversized slate shower stall, it’s a sign that you probably haven’t learned to appreciate the simple rhythms of life ... if your furniture is distressed, your conscience needn’t be.”³⁹

Today’s aspirational class lacks such self-consciousness, and many members lack bobos’ financial means. The aspirational class is motivated by self-confident values and is actively choosing its way of life through an extensive process of information gathering and forming opinions and values, some of which involve money but many of which rest on cultural capital instead. They distance themselves from conventional material goods not because they are uncomfortable with wealth (bobos) but rather because material goods are no longer a clear signal of social position or a good conduit to reveal cultural capital or knowledge. Rich oligarchs and the middle class both can acquire “stuff,” but, for the aspirational class, it is members’ eagerness to acquire knowledge and to use this information to form socially and environmentally conscious values that sets them apart from everyone else—which is why a \$2 heirloom tomato purchased from a farmer’s market is so symbolically weighty of aspirational class consumption and a white Range Rover is not. Aspirational class consumption acts as a signal of its members’ philosophy of life and their value system. Of course, within this new elite cultural formation there is an economic gradient. There are

wealthy aspirational class members—perhaps a partner in a law firm—who are amply spending on nannies, Ivy League tuition, and organic strawberries. Others within this group, such as an unemployed screenwriter or Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) trained artist, are barely able to economically participate in this world but use their insubstantial means to signify membership. The screenwriter too reads the *New York Times* and (perhaps irrationally and to his own economic detriment) also buys his organic strawberries at Whole Foods. He carries a canvas tote that displays a political or literary statement as another signal of his cultural knowledge and engagement with the intellectual current of the moment. In short, this new cultural and social formation is elite by virtue of the material and symbolic trappings required to be a member, but ultimately those who are members of this new cultural and social formation *aspire* to be their version of better humans in all aspects of their lives, with their economic position taking a back seat.

If knowledge is what drives the world economy, it is also the currency by which this new elite group defines itself and acquires the status signals of its position—whether material or symbolic. Thus, the attainment of information and knowledge becomes valued not simply in the new economic world order but in all matters of life. Social norms and goods of the aspirational class reflect an implicit knowledge and procurement of knowledge that informs their consumption practices. Aspirational class leisure, whether reading the *Economist*, listening to NPR, or taking a yoga class, is imbued with knowledge and productivity in the same spirit as work. Motherhood practices of the aspirational class suggest not simply money but extensive research into the perfect way to feed, console, and educate the under-three set. The material goods and practices become the signifiers of this knowledge and thus in turn show membership within this rarified group.

REVISITING VEBLEN

Despite radical changes in the global economy and the means by which we obtain social and economic mobility, much of Veblen's framework for how to understand the signifiers of class position hold true today, albeit in unusual and complicated ways. In the 100-plus years since Veb-

len’s book was first published, his theories apply more today than ever before, and they apply to all of us. Veblen might wonder where all the silver spoons and members of the idle leisure class went, but in their place he would find the aspirational class and their Chemex pour-over coffee. Just as in the 1800s, in the twenty-first century, our desire to reveal status is in keeping with the current economic and social world order.

In the tradition of Veblen’s work, *The Sum of Small Things* looks at how society and class are signified and embodied through the lens of consumption and social practices. As Frank Trentmann writes in *Empire of Things*, his history of consumption from the fifteenth century to the present day, “Here, consumption is relational rather than an individual preference (rational or not), part of a social positioning system that tells people where they stand.”⁴⁰ Conspicuous consumption is still a very significant means to reveal social position, but those in the twenty-first-century aspirational class have found new means to show their status. In this book I argue that three simultaneous consumption patterns are occurring. First, the democratization of conspicuous consumption has provided many more material goods to the middle class, but this change is to their detriment. As they spend more on material status symbols, they are spending less on those things that would pave the way to greater intergenerational upward mobility. Second, as a result of the mainstreaming of conspicuous consumption, the aspirational class’s means of displaying its social position has become more complicated. Its members have found new means of identifying themselves and they do so through spending on behaviors and goods that are not necessarily conspicuous at all and not always material. These new elites are consuming fewer conventional conspicuous consumption items, and instead look to more subtle status markers that come through the forms of conspicuous production and inconspicuous consumption. The wealthier members of the aspirational class devote their financial resources to making their lives easier and more efficient. Inconspicuous consumption also describes the aspirational class’s appropriation of certain behaviors and goods that don’t cost a lot and are not ostentatious but are becoming equally crucial to signaling social position. The choices to practice yoga, take kids to hockey rather than soccer, drink almond milk instead of regular milk, and reuse grocery bags every week are all

signifiers of position that are not inherently more expensive than their alternatives but thought to be more informed. By turn, these behaviors become markers of status. Finally, many of the behaviors that were what Veblen called “conspicuous leisure”—for example, college degrees and playing sports—are now essential to upward mobility. Much of leisure, for the aspirational class, has become productive.

When Veblen wrote his treatise on the leisure class, the practice of conspicuous consumption was relegated to a very marginal stratum of society. Yes, all social classes practiced conspicuous consumption to some extent, but the leisure class was the only group with the means to use material goods to reveal status. Today, material goods are plentiful but their ability to reveal or enable social mobility is increasingly limited. There is no longer a dominant leisure class; in its place the aspirational class is rewriting the patterns of consumption while simultaneously disengaging in conventional material conspicuous consumption. They reveal their social position through much more subtle behaviors and goods that are not necessarily expensive but imply a rich cultural and social capital relegated to aspirational class membership. The members of the aspirational class are not the villains of Wall Street, Russian oligarchs buying up London and Manhattan, they are not plutocrats on private jets. They are no leisure class. Not all of them make enormous amounts of money, but they are educated and they prize knowledge and engage in consumer practices that reflect these values and cultural capital. Yet, these positive attributes may make the aspirational class even more pernicious than the superrich who are vilified in the media or the leisure class of the nineteenth century. There are not many billionaires and oil titans in the world, but the aspirational class is a big and powerful cultural formation. Most importantly, through their subtle and increasingly inconspicuous choices in how to spend, how to behave, and what to value, they shore up their and their children’s distinct sociocultural (and often economic) position of privilege, leaving everyone else out. The aspirational class members’ self-assurance with their decisions and seeming deservedness of their social position allows them to ignore the growing inequality all around them. At the very least, they do not see themselves to blame. Because of the nature of the data and research undertaken, this book reports on the patterns of consumption in America. But without question, the observations regarding class, social position-

ing, and the emergence of the aspirational class are witnessed in geographies far beyond America’s boundaries. In fact, the emergence of the new immaterial means to status—inconspicuous production, conspicuous production, and motherhood practices—can be seen across Western affluent countries. A walk through Notting Hill reveals the same consumption habits as those found in San Francisco or Park Slope, Brooklyn. *The Sum of Small Things* attempts to unpack the consumption habits of the twenty-first century, how they have changed, how contemporary consumption patterns reflect our social and economic positions in big and small ways, and the implications of these choices and practices for our communities, our cities, and our society as a whole.