

**Due:** February 16

*Describe the basic ideas presented in Veblen's first book—The Theory of the Leisure Class. Generally, discuss what Veblen meant by the leisure class and how did he explain the leisure class's view of WORK in the modern world of his time?*

The Theory of the Leisure Class examines the nature of economics and the meaning of leisure. While established economists explained human actions entirely by self-interest and competition, Veblen probed deeper. He doubted that self-interest held society together or that people preferred leisure over work. Also, he discovered that there was no leisure class among American Indians, the Ainu of Japan, or Australia's bushmen. Everyone in these cultures worked—not for profit, but because of pride in workmanship and a common concern for their children's welfare.

His study of Polynesians, ancient Icelanders, and the shogunate system of feudal Japan revealed a different kind of society. A leisure class existed in each, but it was not an idle class. Instead, its members worked hard at seizing riches through force or cunning and didn't contribute to the actual production of wealth. What was significant was that they prevailed with the approval of their community.

To Veblen, this fact marked a fundamental change in the attitude of the savage toward work. What had once been a source of pride had become degraded by the transfer of approval to the plundering and predatory ways of the leisure class. Classical economists considered the desire for leisure inherent in human nature, but Veblen maintained that what was inherent in human nature was pride in work. As men plundered, seized booty and women, and received admiration for their prowess, approval transferred from the once-honored way of life to the spirit of plunder—and the leisure class gained respect.

As societies progressed, continued Veblen, the leisure class changed its occupation and refined its methods, but its goal remained the same—the accumulation of goods without productive work, but by seizure. Applying his findings to the United States, Veblen wrote: ". . . by heredity human nature still is, and must indefinitely continue to be, savage human nature." Modern plunder did not exist for booty or women, but for the accumulation of money and its lavish display. The savage displayed numerous wives, the barbarian his conquests of war; in the same vein, modern savages displayed wealth.

So Veblen arrived at a thesis: the leisure class advertises its superiority through conspicuous consumption—enjoying leisure more fully by being able to display it before the public. Thus, the modern U.S. businessman, by seeking and accumulating money and then displaying it—either subtly or conspicuously—is the modern counterpart of a savage heritage. Furthermore, everyone—the worker, the middle-class citizen, and the capitalist—seeks through conspicuous expenditure and even the waste of money to prove status.