Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929)   "Conspicuous Leisure"

- American economist
- Born in farm country of Minnesota (Norwegian settlers)
- Norwegian farmers vs. English townspeople

- *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)

    Takes the appearance of an anthropological study of the "behavior of people who possess or are in the pursuit of wealth, and who, looking beyond their wealth, want the eminence/status that, or so they believe, wealth was meant to buy." (John Kenneth Galbraith, *Introduction*)

    Book on snobbery and social pretense; the effect of wealth on behavior.
    Context: American society at the end of the 19th century: the "Gilded Age" (Rockefellers, Carnegies, Vanderbilts, etc).
    A rhetorically clever critique of the rich - purports to be a purely descriptive anthropological study (appearance of objectivity); no prescriptions offered. But, read between the lines, it is a "devastating put-down" (JKG, *Intro*).

"Conspicuous Leisure" (Chapter 3)

Some terms:

pecuniary - money-related; monetary

pecuniary struggle - struggle to acquire and exhibit wealth in order to gain status

pecuniary emulation - effort to equal or surpass another in status associated with wealth

leisure - nonproductive consumption of time

leisure class - upper class exempt from productive work

Veblen claims that the pecuniary struggle is the driving force behind the development of culture and society.

The pecuniary struggle should make humans industrious and frugal. Veblen thinks otherwise:
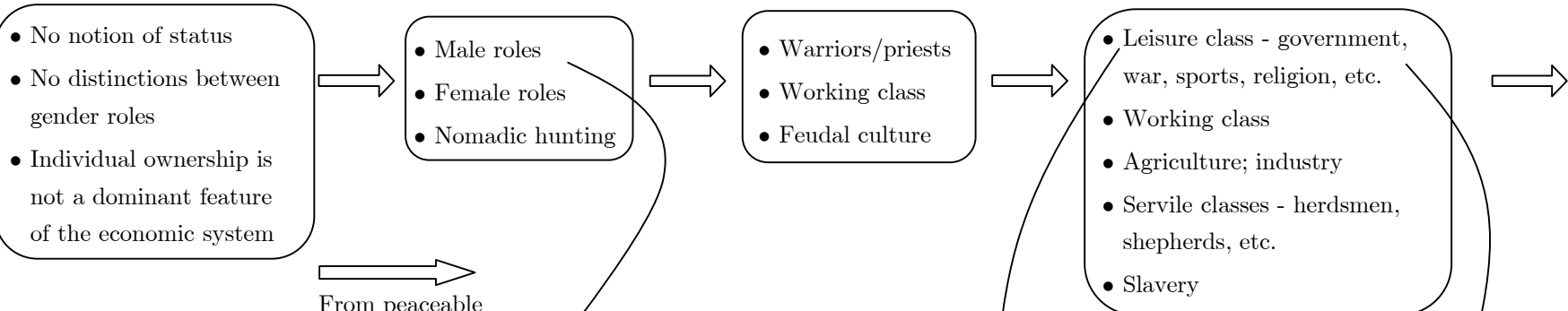- For the working class (the "pecuniary inferior" class) - superficially this is true, but later we'll see otherwise.
- For the wealthy class (the "pecuniary superior" class) - pecuniary emulation demands abstention from work.

The struggle for wealth (private property) is due to pecuniary emulation. It is **not** a struggle for subsistence. If it were a struggle for subsistence, there would come a definite point after which the incentive to accumulate goods would stop. But there is no such point. Pecuniary emulation ingrains itself into one's sense of worth.

Veblen's Account of the Development of Society

Peaceable ⟹ Predatory ⟹ Quasi-Peaceable Industry ⟹ Modern

Savages ⟹ Barbarians ⟹ Moderns

- No notion of status
- No distinctions between gender roles
- Individual ownership is not a dominant feature of the economic system

⟹

- Male roles
- Female roles
- Nomadic hunting

⟹

- Warriors/priests
- Working class
- Feudal culture

⟹

- Leisure class - government, war, sports, religion, etc.
- Working class
- Agriculture; industry
- Servile classes - herdsmen, shepherds, etc.
- Slavery

⟹

From peaceable tendancies to generally warlike tendancies

Both men and women contribute work to society. Women's work comes to be associated with menial labor - "drudgery" - no **status**.

Leisure class becomes established concretely (up to now can be identified theoretically). Conspicuous abstention from work is the mark of superior achievement.

Leisure pursuits. Their nature is predatory - seizure and conversion. They are not productive.

Distinction between "worthy" work (exploit - warfare, hunting, politics, worship, etc.) and "unworthy" work (drudgery - menial labor).

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Changes in society are generated by changes in the material facts of life. The change from peaceable society to predatory society requires enough accumulated stuff to be worth fighting for (tools, weapons, etc).

2

Veblen on Human Nature (explanation for "anthropological" facts)

Concept of dignity/worth/honor is at the base of the development of classes and class distinctions.

Man is an agent engaging in teleological activity (activity with a purpose). So he prefers effective work to futile effort. Esteem is gained by "putting one's efficiency in evidence." The extent to which this is done is reflective of the type of society.

⟨*What are the implicit assumptions here?* ⟩

The Tabu on Labor

Productive labor comes to be seen as dishonorable, disreputable, "morally wrong", incompatible with a worthy life.

- Polynesian Chief example.
- King of France example.

Hence the actual accumulation of wealth (the actual result of productive labor) is not what confers status. What confers status is the *evidence* of wealth.

Leisure is the opposite of productive labor. It is "worthy" (non-productive) work. The value of leisure is that it is evidence of wealth.

The Leisure Class, then, is engaged primarily in demonstrating their "pecuniary superiority" by abstaining from productive work.

Question: How do you do this in private? Veblen describes 4 ways:

(1)   **Accumulate private property** (material possessions) - "trophies" (symbolic family crests; medals; heraldic devices; etc.)

(2)   **Accumulate "immaterial goods"** - scholarship; art; philosophy; knowledge of games, sports, "fancy-breed animals; etc.

> Note: Veblen acknowledges that the initial motives for such accumulation might have been other than the desire to posture. But their continued existence is evidence that they now are considered forms of posture. (They would have been dropped by the leisure class otherwise.)

(3)   **Cultivate manners** - these are most important during the Barbarian stage of cultural development (chivalry; codes of conduct; etc)
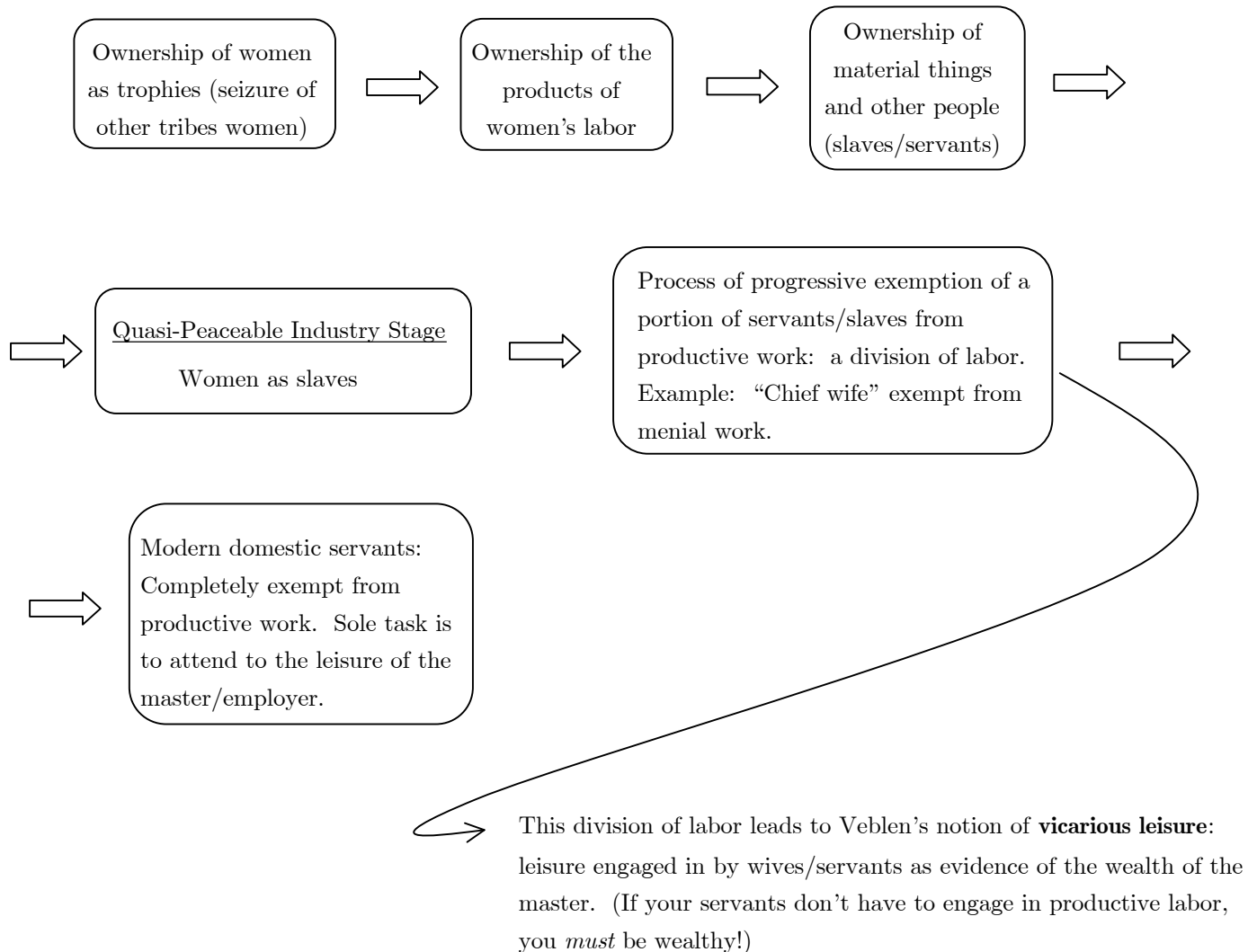
The ulterior economic motive for manners

Veblen's twist: Manners originated as survival skills - indicative of status in the tribe. They continue in the leisure class as evidence of its ability to engage in non-productive, time-consuming activity (conspicuous leisure). Manners have no lucrative effects - they are the voucher of a life of leisure (pg. 69).

3

(4) **Hire domestic service**

Veblen's Account of the Origins of Domestic Service:

Based originally on the concept of *ownership*.

For Veblen, ownership began with the ownership of women:

| Ownership of women as trophies (seizure of other tribes women) | ⇨ | Ownership of the products of women's labor | ⇨ | Ownership of material things and other people (slaves/servants) | ⇨ |

| ⇨ | Quasi-Peaceable Industry Stage — Women as slaves | ⇨ | Process of progressive exemption of a portion of servants/slaves from productive work: a division of labor. Example: "Chief wife" exempt from menial work. | ⇨ |

| ⇨ | Modern domestic servants: Completely exempt from productive work. Sole task is to attend to the leisure of the master/employer. |

This division of labor leads to Veblen's notion of **vicarious leisure**: leisure engaged in by wives/servants as evidence of the wealth of the master. (If your servants don't have to engage in productive labor, you *must* be wealthy!)

"Estranged" leisure: The leisure of the servants is not their own. It is engaged by them on behalf of their employer.

Importance of highly trained servants: They are much better evidence of wealth. They require huge amounts of time and investment for training, and the end-product is non-productive work.

So: The wife who conspicuously consumes goods and highly-trained servants who produce nothing are "evidence of the master's ability to sustain large pecuniary damage without impairing his opulence". (pg. 75)

In modern (as opposed to "barbarian") culture, domestic service still exists. Typical reasons:

(1) Too many "social duties" - sewing circles, sports, charity organizations, clubs, etc. These are dictated by a "mandatory code of decency". It's adherents find these tasks "irksome but unavoidbale".

(2) Too many accumulated goods to manage independently. Help is required to aid in the "onerous consumption of household goods".

Also note: For Veblen, the modern housewife engages in vicarious leisure to further the status of the household as a corporate unit, instead of the husband/master. Veblen veiws the modern household as taking the place of the master as the subject for status in society. (Keep this in mind as we read Friedan; How would Veblen explain the rise of the "feminine mystique"? He has an explanation for the notion of "togetherness" that Friedan talks about.)

How does Veblen compare with Marx?
- views concerning "productive activity"
- notions of alienation (Marx - alienated labor; Veblen - alienated leisure)