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Veblen and Darwin: Tracing the intellectual roots of evolutionism in consumer research.

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Abstract

This paper charts some of the theoretical inertia in marketing theory by revisiting the contribution of Veblen to consumer research in light of recent movements towards integrating evolutionary concepts from the biological sciences. By outlining the heritage of Darwinism to the social sciences more generally, and the legacy of Veblen in particular, we aim to provide some insights into how and why evolutionism has until recently remained marginal to consumer research and how these concepts can be incorporated into the discipline through existing theoretical discourse. Our account provides some insights into the processes by which disciplinary movements become structured out of and (back) into the mainstream discourses of marketing knowledge. We discuss literatures on evolutionism and consumer behaviour focusing on the work of economist and social analyst Thorstein Veblen.

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Introduction

The ‘dominant logic’, or ‘logics’, that structure the field of marketing at any one moment provide useful, productive and manageable domains within which debate, controversy and claims to progress can be played out. Until recently biological accounts of consumer behaviour supported by evolutionism have remained outside of this dominant logic but are now becoming increasingly popular. Although some writers have written extensively on evolutionary theory in consumer and marketing research (for example, Saad 2006, 2007, 2008, Saad and Gill 2000, 2003, Saad and Peng 2006, Hirschman 2008), advocates of the differing and competing theoretical traditions which have structured consumer behaviour theory to date found little value in evolutionism. By rethinking and reminding past insights into the Darwinian roots of consumer behaviour, we can contribute to the positioning of the developing evolutionary logic for marketing theory and the expansion of the disciplinary space of marketing and consumer research in general. While the majority of studies have skilfully interwoven psychological and biological accounts to examine consumption phenomena, a paradigmatic shift in the research process necessitates the explication of discipline’s intellectual origins and historical introspection. Our paper aims to highlight how Darwin’s theory of evolution underpinned and informed Veblen’s historical understanding of status-seeking consumption phenomena and his imaginative conception of how a combination of biological and socio-cultural forces shape consumers’ thoughts and preferences. Our contribution is continue to the opening up the disciplinary space for

emerging evolutionary accounts on consumer behaviour and to encourage pluralism for marketing theory and consumer research.

There can be little doubt that evolutionism has become an increasingly relevant and controversial issue in the social sciences and beyond, to the point where it has begun to emerge as a structuring logic within the social science discourses more generally. One of the legacies of postmodern relativism was that it opened up new spaces in which theoretical traditions that had been suppressed by a spirit of humanism, rationalism and modernism could find some legitimate grounds for further consideration. If, as the logic goes, grand-narratives are defunct in postmodern society then all manner of competing narratives are able to emerge as at least quasi-legitimate. These lines of reasoning have been successfully deployed by those seeking to promote Creationist and Intelligent Design arguments as a challenge to evolutionist axioms of ontology and epistemology. In parallel to this legacy we can also identify a number of broad shifts which have led to a growing interest in biologically-inspired accounts of human action. Advances in gene science as well as developments in neuro-imaging have produced a flurry of interest in accounts of individual and social behaviour which do not draw upon conventional traditions from either cultural studies or psychology. This new found enthusiasm for representing and determining human behaviour in biological/anatomical terms can now be observed in the mainstream marketing literature (See for example, Borsook and Becerra 2005, Eyuboglu and Buja 2007, Senior and Lee 2008, Yoon 2006).

A provisional assessment of the discipline's theoretical development over the last two decades or so reveals a number of dominant logics. For example, an attention to epistemological logics in the early to mid 1990s provided the necessary context within which

marketing theoreticians were able to construct debates concerning the merits and legitimacy of positivism and interpretivism. This logic, most often represented in binary-oppositional terms, enables theoreticians to make knowledge claims to support and reify one side of an argument at the inevitable expense of the counter position. Theory thus achieves legitimacy by achieving a kind of totalising discourse.

It is interesting to observe how these processes both open up and facilitate particular types of knowledge claims and counter claims whilst at the same time silencing or at least diminishing the status and presence of other logics and structures. There is something of the dialectic at play here. Although debates within a particular line of argument may be heated they nevertheless remain stable within their own terms. Over time the relative positions within a dominant logic inevitably become less ambiguous which results in clear lines of difference, broadly accepted 'rules of engagement', as well as the emergence of both explicit and implicit conventions and protocols within the various competing communities intent of making particular types of knowledge claims. In the end competing positions can take on the characteristics of incommensurability. One either accepts a position or not. It is interesting for instance to note how debates over the epistemological status of marketing knowledge gradually and eventually became almost totally non-epistemological in character with researchers holding a belief in the validity and legitimacy of one approach or another. And as these alternative positions become increasingly fixed and immovable they gradually become obsolete because they become less contested and then largely non-contested. This in turn opens up space for alternative theoretical movements, such as evolutionism, to gain ground and find some prominence as some kind of synthesis. Saad (2008: 443) goes as far as to propose that the infusion of Darwinian and biological-based theorising will alleviate what he sees as the weak epistemological state of marketing theory. In the field of consumer research, or consumer behavior, the most persistent dominant logic for at least 40 years now has

relied upon the competition between what can be broadly termed psychological preferences on the one hand, versus sociological and more recently cultural preferences on the other. Although many advocates of a more critically orientated consumer research may have sought to challenge conventional behavioural approaches perhaps with the hope of eventually redefining the field in accordance with more critical discourses, the actual outcome of this period of radical movement was to first fragment the field and then destabilise the existing 'psychology-culture' based logic. Interpretivist, critically orientated consumer research continues to be produced as do psychologically orientated cognitive accounts of consumer behaviour. One reading would be that these alternative communities (broadly defined) have produced some kind of acceptable settlement in which separate, otherwise disinterested communities (to use a Kuhnian phrase) are able to co-exist as largely non-contested realms. And yet neither approach, we would propose, is able to sustain previously held claims to either dominance or radicalism. Arguments over the extent to which consumer action could be best accounted for in individualistic, cognitive terms rather than social, cultural and phenomenological ones had limited call to naturalistic, biological accounts. Over the last 20 years or so Veblen's writing was brought into consumer research to support discussions about social structure and class and was seen as part of some kind of structuralist heritage for writers such as Bourdieu and Baudrillard. And yet, and as part of this revision we propose, Veblen's main contribution can be read not as a sociological one but rather an evolutionary one. The emergence of evolutionism as a new trajectory in marketing theory recasts the core disciplinary logic (Saad 2008). The challenge for cultural theories of marketing is to develop arguments that enable the evolution of bio-cultural accounts so as to challenge theoretical movements which seek to reaffirm priority of the bio-psychological ones.

Evolutionism and Consumer Research

Evolutionary biology and social sciences established an unstable and somewhat antagonistic relationship almost a century ago. Despite the arguments of Herbert Spencer (1967) for the relevance of biological and evolutionary ideas to the understanding of social phenomena, moral issues and psychological research, the ties between biologists and social scientists have remained loose. 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 discouraged economists and sociologists from engaging their theories with mechanisms of evolution.

The most known and enduring evolutionary controversy was caused by the characterization of French naturalist Lamarck as a 'forerunner' of Charles Darwin (Mayr 1992). While for Lamarck organisms adapt their needs and activities according to the inheritance of acquired characteristics (together with environmental changes), Darwin suggested that random variation predetermines the regulatory activity of the environment (natural selection) (Mayr 1982). The debate generated a diversity of opinions and a schism within evolutionist circles for many years after the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Following meticulous fossil evidence and information from genetics, the scientific community embraced Darwin's idea about variation within a population or species and Lamarck's theory of Acquired Characteristics was gradually rejected.

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. The key ideas of Darwinism had been widely misunderstood by social thinkers at the beginning of the 20th century, given that Darwin's public image was generally associated with theological vs. scientific debates, and especially with the assumption that Man is descended from the apes (Bowler 1988). Terms such as 'natural selection' and 'gene' were surrounded by misconceptions and misunderstandings and theorists in the social sciences consciously preferred alternative ways to systematize their newly-formulated academic fields. 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 social behaviours, such as aggression and altruism, are underpinned by evolutionary mechanics. Notwithstanding powerful arguments of epistemological determinism raised by the many critiques of the book, the neophyte field of sociobiology constituted a pioneering effort to synthesize genetics and sociology, supporting the biological foundation of human nature. Moreover, Dawkins (1976) hypothesized that 'memes', as units of cultural information, have substituted the role of genes and contribute to the evolution and transmission of ideas, catch-phrases and clothing fashion from one individual to another. 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, perception and emotions (Pinker 1999, Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 1995). These epistemological assumptions of evolutionary psychologists on how the human mind, life experiences and

cognitive dispositions evolved via natural and sexual selection have attracted the interest of behavioural scientists and, increasingly, a small community of consumer researchers.

By the end of the 1990s the fields of psychology, marketing, economics and, to a lesser extent, sociology and anthropology provided the most popular sources of study for consumer researchers (see for example, Arnould and Thompson 2005). Whilst a recent upward trend in the number of biological/evolutionary studies amongst both social psychologists and sociologists can be observed (Zaltman 2000, Wright 2002), consumer behaviour has traditionally rejected Darwinian based accounts. More recently some consumer researchers have sought to apply evolutionary principles to marketing (Saad 2007, Hirschman 2008) and to re-assert Darwinian principles as a legitimate base for consumer research discourse. Cary (2000) adopts an evolutionary psychological framework wherein modern consumers' minds can be viewed as outcomes of thousands of years of evolution, recently adapted to the socio-cultural forces of civilization. From a more 'positivistic' evolutionary perspective, Parker and Tavasolli (2000) apply physiological theories so as to assess how variations in sunlight and temperature may affect consumer behaviour. Based on an evolutionary psychological framework, we find a growing body of Darwinian accounts applied to various consumer behaviours such as gender differences, consumption and physical attractiveness (Saad and Gill 2000), kinship and food preferences (Colarelli and Dettman 2003), sun tanning (Saad and Peng 2006), gift-giving among young adults (Saad and Gill 2003) prestige and risk-related consumption phenomena (Saad 2007) and evolutionary neuromarketing (Garcia and Saad 2008). The majority of these studies represent contemporary consumer behaviours as universal adaptations to ancestral environmental conditions deeply rooted in an evolutionary past. Despite its increased acceptance in fields such as social psychology and biology, evolutionary psychology has been critiqued on the grounds of epistemology, sexism, behavioural/biological determinism and reductionism (Rose, Lewontin and Kamin 1990,

Gould 1997, Gannon 2002). It can be expected, therefore, that the application of Darwinian based frameworks to consumer behaviour will attract similar epistemological/ideological criticisms. Discussing Veblen's evolutionary interpretation of status-consumption phenomena, formed by an amalgamation of socialization and cultural forces, we aim to provide a platform on which the broadening of marketing's disciplinary capital becomes feasible.

The impact of Darwinism on Veblen

Through the mechanisms of variation, adaptation, inheritance and selection members of various species will survive and reproduce, whilst species with less adaptive traits will be eliminated. Darwin incorporated his theory of natural selection, variation and adaptive mechanisms within his understanding of a wider 'struggle for existence', as a prominent characteristic of life. In Darwin's words:

“A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase...as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life.” Darwin (1859: 116)

Ironically, Darwin's phrase about 'the struggle for existence' was amended by Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinists to the 'survival of the fittest' supporting their views on the ruthless antagonism amongst individuals. Darwin himself never embraced such a thought but, on the contrary, he deemed the struggle for survival as a struggle for progress and collective ends for social life instead of individualistic endeavours for predominance and private gain.

As Flew (1984) argues, it is the origins and development of species which possess the central role in the Darwinian theory of evolution, rather than the catastrophic and teleological outcomes of contest amongst men. In *The Origin of Species* Darwin wrote generally, without explicating in great detail, the evolution of particular species and especially that of humans. Hence, the appearance of *The Descent of Man* (1871) represents his first effort to discuss mental resemblances between animal and human instinctive behaviours. The main hypothesis of the book — which remains almost the same in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) — is that natural selection prearranges and evolves some psychological functions of the human mind. Intelligence and human language constitute central features of adaptive change and therefore natural selection also operates upon individuals.

Darwin wrote on the importance of instincts and habits in both *The Origin* and his diary referring to them as human behavioural patterns associated with the hereditary inclination of individuals or even groups of people. He suggested 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, Flew 1984). Amongst the few social thinkers who followed Darwinian principles in their writings about social and cultural phenomena, we find Bagehot (1881) who linked natural selection with human learning and scientific development; Ritchie (1896) who considered how institutions, customs and habits follow their own evolutionary path and James (1897) arguing about issues of epistemological and political evolution. Veblen was the last and most influential social scientist of the nineteenth century to establish a basis for Darwinian socio-economic evolution.

As Banks (1979: 119) notes in a 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. Both economists (Chao and Schor 1998, Mason 1984, Trigg 2001) and consumer researchers (O’ Cass and Frost 2002, O’ Cass and McEwen 2004) have argued that the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ has received negligible attention. Paradoxically, the conspicuous consumption construct has been widely embraced by popular culture and everyday discourse. 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.

Veblen’s work to date has been used by consumer researchers mainly to promote social accounts of consumption. Culturally inclined consumer researchers have drawn on Veblen as a way to counteract highly individualistic representations of a consumer motivated by purely psychological needs and drives. Rather than seeing the consumer as a rational, information seeking decision maker, these accounts show the consumer to be engaged in a relative and aspirational process in which material culture becomes the site where social display, competition and status are identified as primary. By way of an example, this approach would identify brand preferences to be derived from the desire for social display rather than as, say, a proxy for quality or value. The rise of evolution inspired discourses in consumer research require us to re-figure Veblen so that his work is no longer seen in terms of providing culturally orientated researchers with a set of arguments against rational psychology, but rather as a theorist of evolutionism whose arguments can be used to counter act both cultural and psychological accounts.

Thorstein Veblen was born in 1857 into a family of Norwegian farmers in Minnesota. As a student at Yale University, he became a supporter of the political economist William Graham Sumner, known for his commitment to Social Darwinism. But perhaps the most important intellectual influence on Veblen's work came from Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, whose publications in the second half of the 19th century introduced an evolutionary framework for social life. As Professor at the newly opened University of Chicago, he asked 'Why is economics not an evolutionary science?' (Veblen 1898). As expected, the term 'evolutionary' interested some institutional economists who had considered the application of mechanisms of natural selection and biological ideas to their embryonic discipline (Hodgson 1992). For Veblen evolution and change, contrary to the notion of equilibrium followed by neoclassical economists, should be intrinsic to the thought of economists and social theorists. Throughout his academic work he showed a continued interest in how individuals progress under the influence of evolutionary selection, considering how the mental processes of learning, imitating and acting are imparted through instincts, habits and human culture. Apart from individuals, Veblen (1899) viewed institutions as outcomes of 'natural selection':

"The life of man in society, just like the life of other species, is a struggle for existence, and therefore it is a process of selective adaptation. The evolution of social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions. The progress which has been and is being made in human institutions and in human character may be set down, broadly, to a natural selection of the fittest habits of thought and to a process of enforced adaptation of individuals to an environment which has progressively changed with the growth of community and with the changing institutions under which men have lived." (Veblen 1899: 188)

Veblen's evolutionary vocabulary deserves attention for a deeper understanding of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He frequently applied not only the Darwinian concepts of 'natural selection' and 'struggle for existence' to underpin the assumption of evolutionary institutions and habits of thought, but also used a plethora of conspicuous Darwinian phrases such as 'the past selective adaptation of men's habits of thought', 'the evolutionary process of the system of dress', 'selective adaptation of habits of thought', 'selective adaptation of conventions and methods of life', 'social evolution of the community', and 'struggle for the means of life'. These phrases represent only a small sample of Veblen's engagement with evolutionary terminology. His main aim, however, was not to constrain the newborn field of evolutionary economics by the use and modification of biological terms (Hodgson 2004) unlike Social Darwinists and contemporary socio-biologists who accentuated biological, rather than cultural evolutionary aspects. Veblen thought that modern humans incorporate a hybrid genetic nature that provides them with instincts, habitual elements and potential dispositions that manifest themselves according to the changing nature of institutional structures (Tilman 2007). Human behaviour - and consequently consumer behaviour - is produced via the interaction of instinctual aspects of individual and institutional forces, the interplay between nature and nurture, mind and environment. Veblen's 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. Rejecting epistemic boundaries and leaving aside conceptual dichotomies and debates between culture/nature, Veblen attempts to reconcile the impact of socialization forces with cumulative adaptations in his quest for explaining the individuals' drive for status. He broke a new ground in the theory of economic behaviour and his interpretation of the evolutionary roots of consumer behaviour can contribute to the expansion of disciplinary space in the field of marketing and consumer research.

An evolutionary reading of the Theory of the Leisure Class

A fundamental distinction amongst the three evolutionary stages of savagery, barbarism and modern (industrial) society is drawn in the first chapters of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. This schema is based on the historical periods traced out by Henry Morgan's (1877) *Ancient Society*, an anthropological work that proposed a scheme of Darwinian evolution from primitive to modern societies. In his work 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 the leisure class:

“On the transition to the predatory culture the character of the struggle for existence changed in some degree from a struggle of the group against a non-human environment to a struggle against a human environment. This change was accompanied by increasing antagonism and consciousness of antagonism between the individual members of the group. The conditions of success within the group, as well as the conditions of the survival of the group, changed in some measure; and the dominant spiritual attitude of the group gradually changed, and brought a different range of aptitudes and propensities...” (Veblen 1899: 220).

Following Veblen, the long-lasting stage of barbarism was divided into two sub-stages. During the first sub-stage, war and hunting pervaded social life and the seizure and exploitation of women by warriors produced the institution of private property, a feature absent from the life of savage communities. Along with the establishment and development of individual ownership grew the incentive of emulation, since the diversification of employments and the exploitative activities of men motivated escalating comparison. Booty

and trophies became evidence of honour, force and superiority amongst hunters and warriors, whilst aggression was deemed an honorific action. Nevertheless, as soon as the antagonistic accumulation of symbolic property is superseded by commercial transactions, the second sub-stage of barbarism 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.' Progressively, private affluence substitutes for the good reputation attributed to bellicose and competitive activities. However the possession of wealth, as an outcome of acquisition and accumulation, doesn't aim solely to satisfy a consumer's physical and intellectual needs, it also strives to fulfil the primordial motive of emulation which is for Veblen "probably the strongest, most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper" (Veblen 1899: 110). Considering that the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* coincided with the rapid expansion of utilitarian economic orthodoxy by the end of 19th century (Hamilton 1989) as a newly scientific theory of consumption, Veblen offered an unfamiliar and alternative cross-cultural observation and a bio-cultural analysis of consumption phenomena.

Confining our reading to the first two chapters of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, we notice the sequencing of phrases as they appear in the discussion of one cultural 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. In the same manner, individual ownership evolves into consumption

practices within a social context. A long period of peace and prosperity for the community idolizes a certain standard of (if possible hereditary) wealth outdoing the features of physical endurance, skills at combating and cunning as means of status. The Marxist interpretation of economic surplus provides an explanation for the transition from barbarism to industrial societies, yet Veblen at this stage does not probe into the value of commodities. His contribution to a Marxist dichotomy of use-value and exchange-value originates from an anthropological and cultural viewpoint (Bronner 1989). Veblen embarks upon the analysis of the instinctual aspects of human economic behaviour and then positions the individual in the centre of a cultural process, so as to emphasize how social aspects result from instinctual drives such as emulation (Dugger 1984, Wiltgen 1990). Thus, he proves to be a far superior observer of human nature compared to his contemporaries. His conceptualization of consumer behaviour lies on an evolutionary platform where the biological proclivities supplement and underpin cultural and social structuring, and vice versa. Veblen's consumer does not oscillate between natural principles and upbringing but is a sophisticated amalgam of these processes.

The production of surplus contributes to the emergence of the institution of private property and the distinction between industrial and economic employments. Consequently, individuals undertake to satisfy their esteem motives of self-respect and prestige not only through the reputability of employments but also by the acquisition, accumulation and display of goods. The competitive endeavour for the accumulation and exhibition of possessions emerges via man's innate 'propensity for achievement' which accompanies his everyday activities since the predatory stage where:

“The propensity for achievement and the repugnance to futility remain the underlying motive. The propensity changes only in the form of its expression and in the proximate objects to which directs the man's activity. Under the regime of individual

ownership the most available means of visibly achieving a purpose is that afforded by the acquisition and accumulation of wealth.” (Veblen 1899:33)

Through workmanship, the increasing surplus wealth originated an unfamiliar sense of security to modern man, but at the same time emulation gave birth to various novel wants, desires and human motives. Veblen argues that individuals revive and release their primitive inclination for distinction through affluence, eye-catching consumption practices and status-enhancing activities. One of the most prominent and persuasive critics of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is Campbell (1987) who condenses the rise of modern consumerism as follows:

“the modern consumer (although not proof against such temptations) is characterized by an insatiability which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants themselves, which forever arise, phoenix like, from the ashes of their predecessors. Hence no sooner is one satisfied than another is waiting in line clamouring to be satisfied; when this one is attended to, a third appears, then subsequently a fourth, and so on, apparently, without end.” (Campbell 1987: 37)

The state of ‘insatiability which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants’ can be compared to ‘the chronic dissatisfaction’ of Veblen’s individual followed by ‘a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening interval between himself and this average standard.’ But the origin of wants differs for the two theorists. For Campbell, in a tradition that can be traced to ideas of leading Frankfurt School theorists and psychoanalysis, emotions like imaginative hedonism and day-dreaming (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) strengthen the desire for novel products and new tastes, trapping consumers into a vicious circle of wants that promise to reconcile fantasies and reality (see Shankar and Fitchett 2002, Shankar Whittaker and Fitchett 2006). For Veblen the instinctual drives of human behaviour based on biological factors have historically adapted from a primitive striving for existence to a

present-day competitive striving for status. Contrary to Campbell's criticisms about 'aggressive' conspicuous consumption, Veblen does not aim to propose a coherent theory of consumer behaviour but rather details how emulation and craving for status, as prominent mechanisms for modern consumption, developed throughout the last phase of a bio-cultural evolution.

Following Darwin (1859) who states that an increase in population results in a growing competition for survival amongst organisms, Veblen considers how the transition from small observable communities to greater urban populations adjusts the patterns by which individuals seek status. Social mobility, together with increasing incomes, and the existence of multiple lifestyles in urban populations "leads to a decline in the use of conspicuous leisure as basis of repute due to an increasing relative effectiveness of consumption as evidence of wealth" (Veblen: 1899: 92).

Veblen considers the evolutionary nature of customs and consumption phenomena by extending Darwin's 'natural selection'. Prior to the needs for clothing, luxurious cars, furniture and possessions which signal wealth, consumption emanated from ritualistic and ceremonial practices and developed through a selective process towards demonstrating the evidence of pecuniary strength. For Veblen consumption is:

"traceable back to the initial phase of predatory culture, and there is even a suggestion that an incipient differentiation in this respect lies back of the beginnings of the predatory life. This most primitive differentiation in the consumption of goods is like the later differentiation with which we are all so intimately familiar, in that it is largely of a ceremonial character, but unlike the latter it does not rest on a difference in accumulated wealth. The utility of consumption as an evidence of wealth is to be classed as a derivative growth. It is an adaptation to a new end, by a selective process,

of a distinction previously existing and well established in men's habits of thought.”

(Veblen 1899: 69)

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, adornments and luxurious domestic items, prefiguring the contemporary consumer system of status in Western developed societies. 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.

Veblen's evolutionary legacy to consumption studies

We notice that by the 1950s, and onwards, advocates of Veblen borrowed selectively from his ideas and observations, so as to analyze the emerging mass consumer society in America, Britain and Western Europe (Bocock 1993). Packard (1960) probed into the tastes and buying habits of the American social classes substantiating Veblen's viewpoint on conspicuous consumption. Duesenberry (1967) echoed and modernized Veblen's work by developing the term ‘bandwagon effect’ according to which an individual's main aim is to “keep up with the Joneses” so as to preserve his/her self-esteem. Later on, Mason (1981) reversed the theory of the bandwagon effect with that of the ‘snob’ effect stating that people preoccupied with social status reject commodities consumed by lower and middle classes. Galbraith (1987) and

Bourdieu (1984) claim that direct display of goods becomes out of fashion, hence conspicuous consumption is disclosed through consumers' taste and intellectual efforts. Contrary to the work of the abovementioned economists and sociologists who focused on the impact of mass consumption and the affluence of new groups of consumers, primarily in terms of occupational class, Baudrillard (1981, 1998) builds upon Veblen's anthropology and his idea about the status-enhancing meaning of commodities in order to stress how the meaning of products has been eroded and diffused under late capitalism and contemporary consumer culture. The Veblenian primitive and barbaric traits of upper-class individuals are intrinsic parts of Baudrillard's (1988) post-Fordist America.

As one of the first economists who left aside the dominant production orientation of his era and immersed himself in the importance of consumption for social and economic behaviour, Veblen oversimplified the description of complex social rituals (Bronner 1989) limited his analysis to socially visible consumption actions (Campbell 1987) and reduced the flow of cultural consumption tastes from the top to the bottom of social hierarchy (Campbell 1995, McIntyre 1992, Mason 1998). Despite his scientific aspiration to critique utilitarian economic thought, his theory of consumption remained preoccupied with a system of status and prestige. A century after the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the arguments of economists (Frank 1999) psychologists (Pinker 2003) on human behaviour and status consumption are inspired and informed by the observations of Veblen. Materialism and competition among consumers in the 21st century in the post-industrial and affluent societies are clearly adaptations of the conspicuous consumption practices which characterized social life in Veblen's time. Again, it should be emphasized that Veblen does not propose a thorough explanation of modern consumerism but provides some alternative insights into the evolutionary mechanisms which direct human motivation and status consumption

phenomena. Veblen's anthropological perspective skilfully interweaves power class relations and the rising phenomenon of consumer culture. By doing so he is one of the first theorists to bring attention to the absurd, aggressive and illogical aspects of consumer behaviour. Individuals strive to manifest their social superiority through possessions. They are impulsive creatures caught up in an endless attempt to show themselves as in some way remarkable, and primarily more remarkable than others.

As expected, Veblen's insistence on attributing refined aggressiveness to the consumption patterns of a metropolitan and superficial leisure class disturbed and shocked bourgeois self-perception. Perhaps the impact and popularity of the satire upon the mannerisms of the upper classes obscured Veblen's imaginative and innovative endeavours to explicate some socio-economic aspects of consumption and prestige through evolutionism.

Concluding comments

Our paper supports the view that Veblen's arguments on the evolutionary bases of consumption have remained largely unnoticed amongst social scientists and consumer researchers. By rethinking Veblen's contribution in evolutionary terms we have shown how it is possible to begin to develop a bio-cultural logic for marketing theory that builds on the previous traditions of radical interpretivism in consumer research. The re-emergence of evolutionism and other biologically inspired accounts of the consumer need not automatically be assumed to reinforce a non-cultural, non-social paradigm for marketing theory.

As Edgell (1975) argues Veblen's polysyllabic and sometimes archaic writing style, generalizations, endless repetitions, obsession with favourite phrases or ideas, together with

his intellectual oscillation between economics and sociology, discouraged his contemporaries from fully embracing his ideas. Veblen's reluctance to cite sources in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* or to present his ideas within the conventions of an emerging academic sociology are also important in understanding the lack of attention afforded to his work. His unwillingness to organize and develop a methodical and coherent theoretical system and a failure to provide a full framework of socioeconomic evolutionary theory (Riesman 1953, Hodgson 2008) is also problematic. However, despite the contrasting conceptual formulations and scientific inadequacies, Veblen attempted to propose a theory of sorts which incorporates both socio-biological and cultural aspects of consumption phenomena. Ironically, much of Veblen's terminology has been adopted nowadays by progressive evolutionists, hence it would be no exaggeration to say that he can be considered as a progenitor for socio-evolutionary theories today (Dawkins 1976, Pinker 2003) and more recent evolutionary perspectives of consumer behaviour (Saad and Gill 2000, Saad 2007). Based on his insufficient but prophetic accounts of consumerism and quasi-scientific but perceptive observations into human nature, Veblen's work emerges as an inspirational and pioneering theoretical approach to rethink, update and extend understanding of the interaction between biology/evolutionary psychology and consumer research.

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