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The Domestication of Luxury in Social Theory

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ABSTRACT

During the establishment of modern society, luxury consumption played an important role as a symbolic reference for status comparison across class boundaries. But luxury has lost in contemporary sociology the theoretical importance it had in classical sociology. This article develops a historico-sociological explanation for this situation. In a first section, it debates on luxury in the 18th century, in which changing evaluations are interpreted in the context of broader semantic changes reflecting the 'de-traditionalisation' of social structure. Then selected conceptualisations of luxury in classical sociological approaches, including that of Sombart, Simmel, and Veblen are discussed. These classical accounts are the main reference for common sociological concepts of luxury. They also provide a context for understanding the differences between European and US American social structure and semantics. In the last two sections, the argument that the consumer behaviour of elite members lost the key social function it had in 18th and 19th centuries because of the advent of mass consumption, mass media, and the cultural dominance of middle class consumer habits which were observed first in the US. As a result, then, the attention of sociological research now lies on the more subtle distinctions within the highly differentiated stratum of the middle class. At the same time, material and behavioural patterns of luxury are displayed not by concrete members of a group of the super-rich, but virtually in a mass media based celebrity system, leaving the rich more and more out of the sight of sociological observation.

Introduction

Luxury is a rewarding subject for sociology, due to the elusive tensions in which extravagant practices and their validations are embedded under fluctuating social conditions: if hedonistic excess was long considered to be a

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violation of moral or social rules, the aestheticizing refinement of objects and taste has more recently been suspected of promoting social inequalities. We can see an attempt to rationalise these moments of tension in the equation of luxury and affluence. Luxury is thus defined as the transgression of a measure based on social comparison, which, on closer inspection, proves to be barely tangible: the ethically-grounded norm of 'moderation' and the economic idea of a specific amount necessary to achieve an end are not only worlds apart. The aims at issue and how they can be designated for the required resources cannot be defined, but only historically specified.

Since the academic establishment of sociology at the end of the nineteenth century, its interest in luxury has been particularly focussed on one aspect of modern luxury consumption: the performative highlighting of social exclusivity, which renders it effective beyond the circle of luxury consumers. This characteristic is based on the fact that the large amount of time and effort that goes into producing luxury goods severely restricts the group of consumers, who have access to these goods. Luxury thus facilitates social closure in a society in which the theologically founded system of estates has been eroding since the early modern period. In the process, not only the goods, but also the behavioural patterns of luxury consumption can be used as signifiers for differences in social status. For this reason, they radiate far beyond the group of luxury consumers, to society as a whole. They function socially as a means of status comparison. This important role, which luxury begins to play in the social reproduction of the prestige hierarchy, with the formation of modern society, is only conceivable against the background of increasing social mobility and the commodification of consumer goods; however, this also represents a first aspect of its domestication: like any other instrumentalisation, this one also has domesticating effects. They are conspicuous when the group of luxury consumers grew with the rise of the bourgeoisie and, at the same time, the economically stimulating effects of increased commodity consumption become apparent: In the eighteenth century we already find allusions to moderate and, simultaneously, useful luxury.

The starting point for the following considerations is an observation related to the history of semantics. On the one hand, from the eighteenth century to the early sociology of the late nineteenth, luxury is the vantage

point which revealed the prestige hierarchy of modern society. When we talk about luxury, we always also mean the social positions from which luxury is practised, and these social positions become visible not least through luxury consumption. This explains the great interest of social theory in luxury, since the eighteenth century. However, on the other hand, luxury has been losing this exemplary function for consumer behaviour – including that of those excluded from luxury – since the middle of the twentieth century. Sociology's less frequent treatment of it can, at any rate, be interpreted in this way. To stay with the image of domestication, the conspicuously flaunted luxury of the few has become a domestic animal that answers to the name of distinction and accompanies us in our everyday life. Luxury as a practice of privileged excess is no longer a major topic in sociology. Does that mean that the rich, who still exist, are possibly being made invisible, are allowing themselves to be hidden by sociologists?¹ Or has their consumer behaviour simply lost its function of providing social orientation that made luxury of interest to sociology for a while? There are reasons to believe that the disappearance of the subject of luxury from sociology is more than an ideological operation, although such operations can never be ruled out completely.

I

One can view the revaluations that luxury consumption is experiencing in the modern age as an aspect of the genesis of modern society, and interpret the shifts in the semantics of luxury as indicators of social change. In this perspective, which goes beyond considerations purely in terms of the history of ideas, it becomes apparent that the subject of luxury and its modifications are constituted by semantics that have accompanied the genesis of modern society, in its capacity as a consumer society, since the early modern age. If luxury adopts the function of a comparison of status, which effects the social closure of elite groups, in a social system that it is no

¹ Cf. the suspicion entertained by Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (2007: 31) of a 'statistical disappearance of class-based society', which, however, does not primarily refer to the consumer behaviour of the rich, but rather to the distribution of the ownership of means of production that is not recorded statistically.

longer legitimised by traditional norms and rules, then it must be considered as an albeit specific form of consumer behaviour, in a society in which the objects of consumption are available as commodities. The older source-related limitations of access, such as those based on sumptuary laws, are replaced by financial limitations (Bulst 2003). Thus, the spread of commodity consumption appears as a parallel process: As the consumption-based reversal of differentiation in the working world, it complements the observed increasing division of labour, the classic starting point for sociological theories of differentiation since Emile Durkheim (1998 [1893]) or even since Adam Smith (1999 [1776]). Viewed in this light, modern society is characterised by the separation of the social spheres of production and consumption. Increasing numbers of people provide for themselves using the markets and under anonymous conditions; traditional rules of consumption become more diffused: and the patterns of the upper classes also influence the consumption of wider circles. Thus consumption becomes a means for the comparison of status throughout a society, and luxury consumption can achieve the broad social influence described at the beginning of this essay.²

This was already discussed in the debates on luxury in the eighteenth century. In this respect, the debates have something of sociology *avant la lettre*: even before industrialisation, they detect a society in which the segregated living environments of the feudal society are connected by more and more people comparing themselves with the extravagantly-living few and developing – in addition to resentment – aspirations.³ In the semantics of luxury in the modern age, diverging, not solely ethically or conventionally-founded assessments of luxury consumption, which is now spreading beyond the nobility, intertwine with new considerations originating from the field of economics, on the benefits of luxury for society as a whole. The French economist Étienne Bonnot de Condillac got to the heart of this dual role of luxury in the semantics of social theory, which was characteristic for the end of the eighteenth century, in a fitting phrase: '*Nous voulons vivre dans le luxe, et nous voulons que notre luxe soit utile*' ('we want to

² See Schrage (2009a) for a more in-depth examination of this historico-sociological argument. For a short English version see Schrage (2012).

³ See McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982) as a source of inspiration for historical research on consumption. Michael Prinz (2003) gives an overview of more recent research.

live in luxury, and we want our luxury to be useful') (1961 [1776]: 239). This phrase is fitting because it combines the claim of the individuals that their needs are increasing with a new legitimising formula of luxury consumption that was spreading in the eighteenth century, that of its – now economically founded – usefulness for society as a whole.

When Condillac cast the apparent paradox of luxury – a useful increase of needs – in a legitimising formula, he describes the many prior attempts to comprehend luxury and its practices with the aid of antonyms – antonyms that change historically and thus give an insight into structural changes in society: Ancient and Christian doctrines of virtue thus refer to moderation in behaviour which is overstepped by excess and thereby makes luxury phenomena definable and assessable (Vogl 2001). This moderation is codified by catalogues of virtues and customs, but to this day it differs according to class. Legal sanctions on the use of luxury goods, which are particularly important in the case of clothing, therefore also always have the function of suppressing social mobility across the classes and thus upholding a static social order (Bulst 2003). In addition to the ethically conventionalised category of moderation, a legal title is also used as an antonym of luxury: 'basic necessities'. This means sufficient provisions for the self-preservation of the *oikos*, the household. These provisions are appropriate to the particular class and, if there is a shortfall, moral and legal claims can be made to the community or the authorities (Szöllösi-Janze 2003: 153-161).

With the increasing monetisation of social relations and the development of market-related economics, 'luxury' can therefore also be understood to be a disbursement of riches, which is socially functional because it stimulates processes of exchange and promotes prosperity. This is the basis for Condillac's contrast of luxury and statically intended necessities, which, in view of desirable economic dynamics, could now also be connoted negatively. Luxury thus appears to be less an excessive transgression of ethical rules or social codes of conduct, but rather the economically necessary disbursement of a surplus of goods – necessary because only surpluses and the demand for them are able to perpetuate market processes. In contrast to the legal category of basic necessities, this surplus is not measured against what is necessary for the subsistence of

households, but it is instead related to the flow of commodities in society, to the riches of the mercantile territorial state (see Bauer and Matis 1988).

In the eighteenth century, this semantic shift from ethically-based rejection to economically functional affirmation of luxury consumption was disseminated, very effectively first of all by Bernard de Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*. Its formula '*private vices – publick virtues*' displays its polemic power precisely because the functionalistic argument that luxury consumption ensures that the poor have a livelihood is written in the moralising linguistic style of the old virtue-ethics criticism of luxury. The fable describes an industrious beehive that is held together by the greed and thirst for glory of individuals who exploit and try to outdo each other. The intervention of the god Jupiter has the effect that these individuals suddenly behave virtuously, which leads to the decline of trade and to the general demise of the beehive because: 'whilst Luxury Employ'd a Million of the Poor [...] Envy itself, and Vanity, Were Ministers of Industry' (Mandeville 1924 [1714]: 25).

The new economic arguments for luxury consumption are thus put forward in the old language of its moral condemnation, which made the fable downright unpalatable for Mandeville's contemporaries. However, Mandeville's functionalist negation of the code of virtue ethics reproduces the latter's binary structure and it is unable to adequately describe changes in social structures in the eighteenth century. *The Fable of the Bees* contrasts schematically opulently-living, unproductive elites with the poor who are reproducing on the threshold of misery. In this way, the middle area of 'decencies', as they were called, is ignored: these are those modes of consuming that conform neither to the excessive luxury consumption of the nobility, nor to the subsistence minimum or the codified consumption patterns of the feudal system.⁴ It is bourgeois consumption, which, in the eighteenth century, it is understood as moderate luxury because, on the one hand, it is open to using goods as a signifier – and means – of social ascendancy and to allowing itself to be guided by noble role models and fashions in the process, but, on the other hand, it avoids excessive and ruinous consumption. An important argument for this moderate luxury is the refinement of manners and its characteristic of promoting general

⁴ See Kim-Wawrzinek (1972) for the graded catalogues of requirements of this period.

prosperity, which has been attributed to moderate luxury since the eighteenth century. Thus David Hume believes that luxury provides 'authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty' (Hume 2003 [1742]: 112).

II

This understanding of luxury as refining manners and thus also civilising emotions is at the centre of Werner Sombart's historical sociology of luxury consumption. His book *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (*Luxury and Capitalism*), published in 1913, and many other observations in his multivolume work on capitalism, address the subject of luxury, in order to place it in the context of the historical reasons for the emergence of capitalism, which were widely discussed (for example, in the work of Max Weber) in the contemporary German sociology (Sombart 1996 [1913]). Sombart's interpretation of theories of luxury against the background of the acute consequences of industrialisation was, however, peripheral to the 'social question' in sociology (see Pankoke 1970). Not only Marxism viewed luxury as a field of unproductive disbursements, which were incidental in light of a historical development model that placed the focus on the field of production (Bovenschen 1996: 7). But this applies to the field of consumption as a whole, not just the subject of luxury.⁵

Sombart reconstructs the history of the diffusion of luxury since the Renaissance in detail and uses it to formulate his historical-sociological thesis, that the emergence and assertion of capitalism was not causally, but still substantially, assisted by luxury (Sombart 1996 [1913]: 137ff.). In this way, he highlights the stimulating function of luxury consumption for trade and industry, which corresponds to a hedonistic attitude on the consumers' part that strives for the refinement of sensual pleasures. According to Sombart, this differs from traditional forms of consumption insofar, as it is orientated towards 'sensual pleasure', which is also manifested in the

⁵ See Robert Michels (1970 [1928]) on the dissemination and impact of the immiseration thesis – which was also important in the early 20th century – far beyond the field of Marxist discussion. For an overview of the treatment of the subject of consumption in German sociology, see Schrage (2009b).

loosening of moral sexual norms in modernity (Sombart 1996 [1913]: 117ff.). Sombart also attributes a constitutive role to consumption in the contemporary social order, in the last volume of his work *Der moderne Kapitalismus (Modern Capitalism)*, and highlights the social mechanism of fashion, which represents an ‘essential element’ of high capitalist society (Sombart 1987 [1927]: 611). The acceleration of changes in fashion, which Sombart observed, results, on the one hand, from the ‘reduction of the production and circulation times of goods’ due to production techniques and from the reduction in their prices. It is also a result, on the other hand, of the desire of increasing groups of consumers to ‘improve [their] awareness of life’, meaning the enjoyment of consumer goods, but also the ability of these consumer goods to express social advancement (Sombart 1987 [1927]: 942f., 610). Thus, in Sombart’s view, the accelerated changes in fashion is a means to increase social mobility, although he clearly differentiates between the consumption of laboriously produced (i.e. handmade) luxury goods, with their socially exclusive sphere of dissemination, and machine-made ‘surrogates’. The latter are the vehicle through which signifiers of luxury consumption do indeed spread to the lower classes and incite the pursuit of ‘pseudo luxury’, but they are merely poor-quality signifiers (Sombart 1987 [1927]: 623, 625).

Like Sombart, Georg Simmel sees in fashion a social mechanism that gains momentum in the modern age and in which ‘insecure classes and individuals, pressing for change, find a pace that mirrors their own psychological movements’. For Simmel too, fashion is ‘essentially the fashion of a social class’ and changes in fashion seem to be a process that starts with the elite, who are striving for social closure, and spreads to the lower classes by emulation. Changes always spread from the top to the bottom. It is thus the luxury pole, the social peak, from which fashions emanate in Sombart and Simmel, in order to then spread to the rest of society (Simmel 1989 [1900]: 640).

The American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* was published in 1899, also argues from this viewpoint. But his perspective differs in a decisive aspect. The groups of luxury consumers of the *Gilded Age* in the USA, which he contemplates, may be similar to the elites of which Sombart and Simmel are thinking: they are

the ultra-rich East Coast families, who made their fortunes particularly in the years following the American civil war, with speculative financial transactions and who, if nothing else, more or less convincingly align themselves with the luxury consumption of the European nobility.⁶ However, while Sombart emphasises the constitutive role of luxury consumption in the development of capitalism and while Simmel quite naturally assumes that the new forms of fashion together with their civilising effects and status constraints always trickle down from the top of society to the bottom, Veblen performs a re-evaluation: he coins the phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’ to define the distinction function of luxury goods also seen by Sombart and Simmel; however Veblen’s analyses are to a large extent based on the critical, if not polemic, intention to brand the luxury consumption of the financial elites of his time as unproductive waste. The utility argument now turns against luxury because, in his opinion, only completely useless goods lend themselves to distinction purposes. For Veblen ‘conspicuous consumption’ first of all represents a means by which these elites, who he considers to be unproductive, illegitimately preserve their social status (Veblen 2009 [1899]). That which Mandeville put forward for a reassessing defence of luxury, that which pulled together Condillac’s idea of useful luxury in the eighteenth century is strictly divided by Veblen and directs his condemnation. Luxury consumption appears as a quasi-feudal relic, as a waste of the resources of society by the socially superfluous rich. In this way, Veblen’s criticism of luxury does not use the arsenal of moralising *topoi* of traditional European criticism of luxury. Instead a kind of social criticism develops here, which was so far unknown in the 19th century and which, as the sociologist C. Wright Mills notes, ‘used the American value of efficiency to criticize American reality’ (Mills 2002 [1953]: 113). *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is written in the spirit of that movement, to which Veblen himself gave the name: technocracy (Veblen 1963 [1921]).

Veblen’s historico-philosophical formulation of the struggle between the productivist ideal of efficiency and the profligate striving for profit and prestige associated with trade thus represents, in terms of the sociology of knowledge, as Christopher Shannon observes, the ‘triumph of a class whose

⁶ See Hofstadter (1955) for what is still a useful depiction of the sociohistorical background, and Riesman (1953) on Veblen.

claim for universality originates in its distance to market relations and its command of certain neutral, technical skills' (Shannon 1996: 3). In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, this group does not appear in a prominent place; however, the polemic against wasteful consumption draws on precisely its values and can therefore certainly be understood as the manifesto of the new middle class that was emerging at around 1900 in the USA. Having grown rapidly and becoming the dominant social stratum, this class provides the base for mass consumption, in the post-war period. In the 1950s, they became the object of study for David Riesman and other American sociologists. According to Riesman, Veblen's criticism of conspicuous consumption had 'a reforming impact on our middle-class culture [...] the crazy millionaire is dead, and a subdued nonconspicuousness seems to be spreading over our leisure and consumption practices' (Riesman 1953: 170).

III

The middle class has, since the 1920s – albeit interrupted by the crisis of the Great Depression – become the culturally dominant stratum, first of the US-American and then, in the post-war years, of Western European societies. Its lifestyle is intrinsically linked to the consumption of industrially produced, standardised goods. These production methods lead to falling prices for consumer goods and also enable new consumer items like the automobile to move into the catalogue of essential goods of the middle class. This gave contemporary observers the impression of living in an 'affluent society', the term coined by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith in the 1950s. According to Galbraith, the decisive economic innovation of this 'affluent society' is that productivity increased to such a degree, that the assumption, taken for granted in earlier periods, that there was not enough for everyone, proves to be unfounded. The production of goods thus obtains a completely new social function; it no longer serves solely to supply society with goods and satisfy the needs of its members, graduated according to their social position. In the 'affluent society' in contrast, the increase in production at the same time represents an alternative to redistribution of property, as increasing consuming opportunities divert the attention from social inequalities. The idea that the income of the majority must be limited to a

low level, which seemed unquestionable for 19th century economics, no longer seems to match reality – as the broad middle class also lives ‘affluently’ (Galbraith 1998 [1958]). Galbraith’s concept of the ‘affluent society’ thus describes a fully productivist society – a society in which increasing production is an unquestioned goal, not in order to guarantee sustenance, but primarily to insure social stability. Galbraith’s reflections are certainly meant to be critical: They can be read as an attempt to modernise Veblen’s social criticism, under the conditions of mass consumption. This criticism does not follow Veblen in condemning the luxury consumption of a ‘superfluous’, unproductive class, however. Instead it criticises the fact that the permanent growth of production output takes place not in order to satisfy human needs, but for the sake of social stabilisation. Affluent consumption in Galbraith thus no longer appears as the means by which an elite group maintains its social prestige. It now represents a social pathology. Galbraith’s criticism of growth is, at the same time, a comprehensive social criticism. The view of privileged luxury consumption, which was essential for Veblen, thus also disappears. The super-rich do, of course, still exist in Galbraith’s ‘affluent society’, as does poverty, although he pays less attention to it, since poverty concerns ‘the fate of a voiceless minority’ (Galbraith 1998 [1958]: 79). However, the rich lose their function as a role model for the consumer behaviour of other groups, which had hitherto been highlighted by all sociological observers. In the mass-consumption society, this function is taken over, as the sociologist C. Wright Mills puts it, by a ‘national status system of professional celebrities’ – with the emergence of the national mass media of radio and television. The wealthy dame of local high society is replaced by film stars and political and business managers, as role models for status and consumption (Mills 2002 [1953]: 116).

The change in the critical arguments that takes place in Galbraith’s work corresponds to changes in the lifestyle of the middle classes. Their basic structure is summed up by the sociologist David Riesman with the term ‘standard package’. This package consists of ‘a set of goods and services, including such household items as furniture, radios, television, refrigerator, and standard brands in food and clothing, [it] shows a considerable uniformity throughout American society: it encompasses the (steadily rising) national standard of living’. The consumption based on the

standard package is accompanied, according to Riesman, by a 'general lowering of barriers' between age groups, sexes and between the different regions and social classes, 'with the prospect in view of a fairly uniform middle-majority life style' (Riesman and Roseborough 1993 [1955]: 114).

Riesman's standard package is an organisational principle that ranks consumer items in a specific way and relates them to the social position of the consumers. Its logic differs profoundly from that of earlier phases of society. In the world of luxury consumption, the value of items is measured by their proximity to the top of society; it is inferred from the prestige value of the luxury items. They may remain inaccessible for most people, but they nevertheless shape the valuation of that which is within reach of one's own purchasing power. In contrast, the standard package designates a set of items that are actually available and that are directly integrated into the everyday life of the great consumer public. Televisions and refrigerators, homes and cars, brands of food and clothing are incorporated into and give structure to consumers' day-to-day life, as essential components of a lifestyle to which all aspire and which is considered to be accessible to all.

Industrial standardisation makes consumer items accessible to many. Sombart's degradation of 'surrogate consumption' thus becomes less plausible in view of the novel benefits that life with the standard package can provide: these benefits essentially lie, in view of a (socially and geographically) highly mobile lifestyle, in establishing structures of recognisability, reliability and habit. Its embedding in the normal lifestyle of the middle class also means that rapidly increasing spatial mobility encounters few cultural barriers of local conventions and customs because the package can be found everywhere and ways of life converge, not only in the USA, but in Western Europe as well. In fact, the use of standard package goods does not require specific cultural premises. Compared to consumption patterns governed by traditional norms and rules, it is characterized by a low cultural threshold. Thus, in a country as ethnically diverse as the USA, it can diffuse comprehensively and even take over socially integrative functions, but it also can adapt to other cultures, such as Western Europe or Japan. For middle class consumers, it offers continuity against the background of accelerated change in job profiles and career paths. The same applies to social mobility, that desire for advancement that

is characteristic of the American middle class. This successive improvement of one's position within the increasingly dominant stratum of the middle class does not signify a transgression of class boundaries, but place over the course of the individual's life.

Consumption thus becomes a means of integration into this stratum of society, while its distinctive effects, which certainly continue to exist, are not revealed in the termini of class society: 'Some seek to level it up, and some level down, with the result that quality differences are minor, and expense-concealing, rather than class-revealing' (Riesman and Roseborough 1993: 114f.).

The object world of the standard package thus is revealed from an intermediate social position, not from the consumer styles of the upper class. The standard package structures the historically novel way of life of a class that is numerically large and whose lifestyle is socially dominant: 'The flexible and adaptive uniformity of this belt', as Riesman says summing up, represents 'a departure from the traditionalism of the two social extremes' (Riesman and Roseborough 1993: 135).

IV

A core element of classical theories of luxury, the concept of social distinction, is still one of the most important sociological analytical concepts for consumer behaviour. It informed the works of Sombart, Simmel and Veblen in equal measure and made luxury a phenomenon which affected the whole of society at that time, because the seemingly disconnected groups of luxury consumers were connected with the rest of society by the mechanisms of emulation and distinction. The modern sociological approach which most closely follows this concept, the approach of Pierre Bourdieu, also adopts Veblen's 'gratuitous luxury', which manifests itself in the 'destruction of riches, conspicuous consumption, squandering' (Bourdieu 1987: 55). However, this does not represent a subjective – and, at the same time, objectively dysfunctional – urge of the elite for Bourdieu, as it did for Veblen. Instead it represents the effect of an objective homology between 'the classes of products and the classes of consumers' (Bourdieu 1987: 232). Against this background, Bourdieu finds the extravagant

practices themselves less important than their subtle effects of distinction, which extend far into the middle class and which he uses to map the social prestige hierarchy on the basis of consumer behaviour.

While the geographical presence of the elite consumers of luxuries is of central importance for French and, in particular, Parisian society, and the empirical basis for Bourdieu's *Distinction* derives from his investigations undertaken in the 1960s, the difference between his analysis and those of the American sociologists lies less in the subject than in the approach and the perspective. Bourdieu searches for cultural patterns of behaviour that can explain the reproduction of the social prestige hierarchy and the persistence of the top and the bottom. Riesman's point of departure is his observation of a homogenisation of the ways of life in the middle class. These ways of life are also pervaded by subtle distinctions, which are noticeable within this class and, in particular, between protagonists who have a similar status and therefore come into contact with each other: from the American point of view, *keeping up with the Joneses* – the imitation of peers, neighbours and colleagues – appears far more central than orienting oneself on elitist luxury consumers.

In this context, the question, which Bourdieu barely tackles, of where the knowledge about ever newer opportunities for consumption comes from and how it spreads is posed: where do the role models for the social aspirations that become manifest in consumption originate? The 18th and 19th centuries say: from above, meaning the very specific groups and places in which these role models were to be found. Veblen's leisure class still appeared in the theatres and opera houses of the American East Coast and it is the wealthy dame, whose elaborate desire for distinction awakens the desires of the others that Veblen wants to drive out of them. This may still be plausible in 1960s Paris, but in the American sociology of the 1950s, it is already a thing of the past. The wealthy dame's place is taken by the film diva, whom one can see in a thousand copies in the cinema, instead of in the foyer of the opera house, and who, to a certain extent, is employed to exemplify through her own life luxurious consumer options, a life that is inaccessible for the audience, that is filled with abundance but also with blows of fate. The film diva of early Hollywood, if successful, is the younger cousin of the opera diva and thus is still located within the fashionable

salons of an earlier era. The crazy millionaire, however, was already dead in the 1950s. He was soon replaced by the super-employee with a special mandate, a James Bond, and has now been replaced by people like Bill Gates. This is no doubt a relief to the many billionaires who we do not know. However, this release from the social role assigned to them by early sociologists is perhaps only the other side of the nameless streams of money that have taken on a life of their own. The important aspect of these concluding observations is not cultural criticism, for which they might be mistaken. It is not a question of mourning good old luxury or accusing contemporary forms of celebration of luxury of being cheap surrogates. The intention of this essay is instead to show why the subject of luxury disappeared from sociology and why there might be good reasons for this. It is not luxury itself that has disappeared, but rather the social function that it once had and that made it of interest to sociology. Instead of focusing on the sophisticated luxury pole, sociology has turned its attention to the subtle distinctions.

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