



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

ALLISON L. HURST

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
CORVALLIS, OR



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology by Allison Hurst is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

Download for free at <https://open.oregonstate.edu/sociologicaltheory>

Publication and on-going maintenance of this textbook is possible due to grant support from [Oregon State University Ecampus](https://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/).

[Suggest a correction](#)

Contents

Part I. Early American Sociology

1. Thorstein Veblen, on Labor(1898)

9

PART IV

EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Thorstein Veblen, on Labor(1898)

“Early humans were members of a group which depended for its survival on the industrial efficiency of its members and on their singleness of purpose in making use of the material means at hand.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article entitled “The Instinct of Workmanship and the Iirksomeness of Labor,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in September 1898, pages 187-201. It has been abbreviated for publication here.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Veblen tries to understand how it is that we could have a collective aversion to work when, as a species, we have always had a very strong “instinct for workmanship.” He then contrasts sportsmanship (fighting) with workmanship, locating the denigration of work in the development of a “predatory culture.” As you read this passage and follow Veblen’s argument, think about how it compares with Marx’s description of the rise of capitalism and Weber’s explanation of the difference between class and status societies.

The Instinct of Workmanship¹ and the Iirksomeness of Labor

It is one of the commonplaces of the revived economic theory that work is irksome. Many a discussion proceeds on this axiom that, so far as regards economic matters, people desire above all things to get the goods produced by labor and to avoid the labor by which the goods are produced. In a general way the common-sense opinion is well in accord with current theory on this head. According to the common-sense ideal, the economic beatitude lies in an unrestrained consumption of goods, without work; whereas the perfect economic affliction is unremunerated labor. We instinctively revolt at effort that goes to supply the means of life.

1. A note on gender-neutral language here. In most cases, where Veblen uses “man” to denote all humans, I have changed the text to reflect this (most of the time, adopting “we” and “us” instead of the generic “men”). However, in cases where it is obvious that women were not encompassed by the word, such as “sportsmanship”, the original term has been retained. In the case of workmanship, the original has sometimes been retained (as here, in the title), and at times changed to a more generic work, labor, or craft, as more appropriate to the intended meaning.

No one will accept the proposition when stated in this bald fashion, but even as it stands it is scarcely an overstatement of what is implied in the writings of eminent economists.

Yet, for all the apparent absurdity of the thing, there is the fact. With more or less sincerity, people currently avow an aversion to useful effort. The avowal does not cover all effort, but only such as is of some use; it is, more particularly, such effort as is vulgarly recognized to be useful labor. Less repugnance is expressed as regards effort which brings gain without giving a product that is of human use, as, for example, the effort that goes into war, politics, or other employments of a similar nature. And there is commonly no avowed aversion to sports or other similar employments that yield neither a pecuniary gain nor a useful product.

Like other animals, humans are agents that act in response to stimuli afforded by the environment in which they live. Like other species, we are creatures of habit and propensity. But in a higher degree than other species, we mentally digest the content of the habits under whose guidance we act and appreciate the trend of these habits and propensities. We are in an eminent sense an intelligent agent. By selective necessity we are endowed with a proclivity for purposeful action. We are possessed of a discriminating sense of purpose, by force of which all futility of life or of action is distasteful to us. This is a generic feature of human nature. It is not a trait that occurs sporadically in a few individuals.

Our great advantage over other species in the struggle for survival has been our superior facility in turning the forces of the environment to account. It is to our proclivity for turning the material means of life to account that we owe our positions as masters of creation. It is not a proclivity of effort, but to achievement – to the compassing of an end. Our primacy is in the last resort an industrial or economic primacy. In our economic life we are agents, not sponges; we are agents seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end.

All this seems to contradict what has just been said of the conventional aversion to labor. But the contradiction is not so sheer in fact as it appears to be at first sight. Its solution lies in the fact that the aversion to labor is in great part a conventional aversion only. In the intervals of sober reflection, when not harassed by the strain of overwork, our common sense speaks unequivocally under the guidance of the *instinct of workmanship*. We like to see others spend their lives to some purpose, and we like to reflect that our own life is of some use. All of us have this quasi-aesthetic sense of economic or industrial merit, and to this sense of economic merit futility and inefficiency are distasteful. In its positive expression it is an impulse or instinct of workmanship; negatively it expresses itself in a deprecation of waste.

This instinct of workmanship apparently stands in sheer conflict with conventional antipathy to useful effort. The two are found together in full discord in the common run of people; but whenever a deliberate judgment is passed on conduct or one vents, the former asserts its primacy in a pervasive way which suggests that it is altogether the more generic, more abiding trait of human nature. There can scarcely be a serious question of precedence between the two. The former is a human trait necessary to the survival of the species; the latter is a habit of thought possible only in a species which has distanced all competitors, and then it prevails only by sufferance and within limits set by the former. The question between them is, Is the aversion to labor a derivative of the instinct of workmanship? And, how has it arisen and gained consistence in spite of its being at variance with that instinct?

Until recently there has been something of a consensus among those who have written on early culture, to the effect that, human beings, as they first emerged upon the properly human plane, were of a contentious disposition, inclined to isolate their own interests and purposes from those of their fellows, and with a penchant for feuds and brawls. Even today it is held that men are inclined to fight, not to work. This view would make the proclivity to purposeful action an impulse to sportsmanship rather than to workmanship.

There is much to be said for this view. If humans were by derivation a race not of workers but of sportsmen, then there is no need of explaining the conventional aversion to work. Work is unsportsmanlike and therefore distasteful, and perplexity then arises in explaining how we have in any degree become reconciled to any but a predatory life. The history of mankind, as conventionally written, has been a narrative of predatory exploits, and this history is not commonly felt to be one-sided or misinformed. And a sportsmanlike inclination to warfare is also to be found in nearly all modern communities. Similarly, the sense of honor, so-called, whether it is individual or national honor, is also an expression of sportsmanship. The prevalence of notions of honor may, therefore, be taken as evidence going in the same direction.

Yet there is a considerable body of evidence, both from cultural history and from the present-day phenomena of human life, which traverses this conventionally accepted view that makes man generically a sportsman. Obscurely but persistently, throughout the history of human culture, the great body of people have almost everywhere, in their everyday life, been at work to turn things to human use. The proximate aim of all industrial improvement has been the better performance of some workmanlike task. It will not do to say that the work accomplished is entirely due to compulsion under a predatory regime, for the most striking advances in this respect have been wrought where the coercive force of a sportsmanlike exploitation has been least.

The same view is borne out by the expressions of common sense. As has already been remarked, whenever they dispassionately take thought and pass a judgment on the value of human conduct, the common run of people approve workmanship rather than sportsmanship. At the best, they take an apologetic attitude toward the latter. Predatory exploit, simply as such, is not felt to carry its own legitimation. What meets unreserved approval is such conduct as furthers human life on the whole, rather than such as furthers the invidious or predatory interest of one as against another.

The archaic turn of mind that inclines people to commend workmanlike serviceability is the outcome of long and consistent habituation to a course of life of such a character as is reflected by this inclination.

Our life is activity; and as we act, so we think and feel. This is necessarily so, since it is we, the agent, that does the thinking and feeling. Like other species, we are a creature of habits and propensities. We are social animals and the selective process whereby we have acquired the spiritual makeup of a social animal has at the same time made us substantially a peaceful animal. We may have wandered far from the ancient position of peacefulness, but even now the traces of a peaceful trend in our everyday habits of thought and feeling are plain enough. The sight of blood and the presence of death, even of the blood or death of the lower animals, commonly strike inexperienced persons with a sickening revulsion. In the common run of cases, the habit of complacency with slaughter comes only as the result of discipline. In this respect we differ from the beasts of prey. In our unarmed frame and in the slight degree to which our muscular force is specialized for fighting,

as well as in our instinctive aversion to hostile contact with ferocious beasts, we are to be classed with those animals that owe their survival to an aptitude for avoiding direct conflict with their competitors, rather than those which survive by virtue of overcoming and eating their rivals.

We are the weakest and most defenseless of all living things, and, according to the Law of the Jungle, it is our part to take advice and contrive to turn diverse things to account in ways that are incomprehensible to the rest. Without tools we are not a dangerous animal, as animals go. And we did not become a formidable animal until we had made some considerable advance in the contrivance of implements for combat. In the days before tools had been brought into effective use – that is to say, during by far the greater part of the period of human evolution – we could not be primarily agents of destruction or disturbers of the peace. We were of a peaceable and retiring disposition by force of circumstances. Tools and implements, in the early days, must have served chiefly to shape facts and objects for human use, rather than for inflicting damage and discomfort. Industry would have to develop far before it became possible for one group of men to live at the cost of another.

By selection and by training, our life, before a predatory life became possible, would act to develop and to conserve in us an instinct for workmanship. The adaptation to the environment which the situation enforced was of an industrial kind: it required us to acquire facility in shaping things and situations for human use. This does not mean the shaping of things by the individual to her own individual use simply; for archaic humans were necessarily members of a group, and during this early stage, when industrial efficiency was still inconsiderable, no group could have survived except on the basis of a *sense of solidarity* strong enough to throw self-interest into the background. Self-interest, as an accepted guide of action, is possible only as the concomitant of a predatory life, and a predatory life is possible only after the use of tools has developed so far as to leave a large surplus of product over what is required for the sustenance of the producers. Subsistence by predation implies something substantial to prey upon.

Early humans were members of a group which depended for its survival on the industrial efficiency of its members and on their singleness of purpose in making use of the material means at hand. Some competition between groups for the possession of the fruits of the earth and for advantageous locations there would be even at a relatively early stage, but much hostile contact between groups there could not be; not enough to shape the dominant habits of thought.

What we can do easily is what we do habitually, and this decides what we can think and know easily. We feel at home in the range of ideas which is familiar through our everyday line of action. A habitual line of action constitutes a habitual line of thought and gives the point of view from which facts and events are apprehended and reduced to a body of knowledge. A process or method of life, once understood, assimilated in thought, works into the scheme of life and becomes a norm of conduct, simply because the thinking, knowing agent is also the acting agent. What is apprehended with facility and is consistent with the process of life and knowledge is thereby apprehended as right and good.

Under the canon of conduct imposed by the instinct of workmanship, efficiency, serviceability, commends itself, and inefficiency or futility is odious. We contemplate our own conduct and that of our neighbors, and pass judgment of complacency or of dispraise. The degree of effectiveness with which we live up to the accepted standard of efficiency in great measure determines our contentment with ourselves and our situation.

Sensitiveness to rebuke or approval is a matter of selective necessity under the circumstances of associated life. Without it no group of persons could carry on a collective life in a material environment that requires shaping to our ends.

Under the guidance of this taste for good work, we are compared with one another and with the accepted ideas of efficiency and are rated and graded by the common sense of our fellows according to conventional schemes of merit and demerit. The visible achievement of one of us is, therefore, compared with that of another, and the award of esteem comes habitually to rest on an invidious comparison of persons instead of on the immediate bearing of the given line of conduct upon the approved end of action. The ground of esteem in this way shifts from a direct appreciation of the expediency of the conduct to a comparison of the abilities of different agents. Instead of a valuation of serviceability, there is a gauging of capability on the ground of visible success. It becomes the proximate end of effort to put forth evidence of power, rather than to achieve an impersonal end for its own sake, simply as an item of human use.

Over time, aggression and predatory behavior creep in, as a way of marking success...

With the increasing density of population that follows from a heightened industrial efficiency, the group passes, by force of circumstances, from the archaic condition of poverty-stricken peace to a stage of predatory life. When a group emerges into this predatory phase of its development, the employments which most occupy men's attention are employments that involve exploit. The most serious concern of the group, and at the same time the direction in which the most spectacular effect may be achieved by the individual, is conflict with men and beasts. The assertion of a strong hand, successful aggression, usually of a destructive character, becomes the accepted basis of repute. The dominant life interest of the group throws its strong light upon this creditable employment of force and sagacity, and the other, obscurer ways of serving the group's life fall into the background. The guiding animus of the group becomes a militant one, and men's actions are judged from the standpoint of the fighting man.

As the predatory culture reaches a fuller development, there comes a distinction between employments. Prowess comes near being recognized as the sole virtue. Other employments, in which people are occupied with tamely shaping inert materials to human use, become unworthy and end with becoming debasing. The tame employments, those that involve no obvious destruction of life and no spectacular coercion of refractory antagonists, fall into disrepute and are relegated to those members of the community who are defective in predatory capacity; those who are lacking in massiveness, agility, or ferocity. Therefore, the able-bodied barbarian of the predatory culture, who is at all mindful of his good name, severely leaves all uneventful drudgery to the women and children of the group. He puts in his time in the manly arts of war and devotes his talents to devising ways and means of disturbing the peace. That way lies honor.

In the barbarian scheme of life, the peaceable, industrial employments are women's work. They imply defective force, incapacity for aggression or devastation, and are therefore not of good report. In this way industrial occupations fall under a polite odium and are apprehended to be substantially ignoble. They are unsportsmanlike. Labor carries a taint, and all contamination from vulgar employments must be shunned by self-respecting men.

Where the predatory culture had developed in full consistence, the common-sense apprehension that labor is ignoble has developed into the further refinement that labor is wrong. In the further cultural development, when some wealth has been accumulated and the members of the community fall into a servile class on the one hand and a leisure class on the other, the tradition that labor is ignoble gains an added significance. It is not only a mark of inferior force, but it is also a perquisite of the poor. *This is the situation today.*

There is no remedy for this kind of irksomeness, short of a subversion of that cultural structure on which our canons of decency rest. Appeal may of course be made to taste and conscience to set aside the conventional aversion to labor; such an appeal is made from time to time by well-meaning persons, and some fitful results have been achieved in that way. But the commonplace, common-sense person is bound by the deliverances of common-sense decorum on this head – the heritage of an unbroken cultural line of descent that runs back to the beginning.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Is work irksome to us? Compare and contrast your answer with that provided by Veblen.
2. Many of the first sociological theorists made comparisons between human animals and non-human animals. What sets us apart as a species, according to Veblen? How does this compare to what Marx thought set humans apart? What other comparisons can be made here between Veblen and Marx? Do you think Veblen had read Marx? Explain.
3. What is the “instinct of workmanship”? Why has Veblen chosen the word “instinct” to define this phenomenon?
4. Veblen was known primarily as an economist, and economics is the only social science he mentions in this article. What makes him a sociologist? Find passages and assertions in support.
5. In this article, Veblen asserts a sociology of knowledge, of how we come to think as we do, about the things we do. According to him, what is the source of our knowledge? What is the relationship between our thoughts, beliefs, values and the context (social and environmental) in which we live? Further, what is the source of our ethical values and social norms?
6. Veblen also puts forth a theory about how the gendered division of labor emerged, and with what consequences for relations between the sexes. What does he say? How does this compare with Durkheim?
7. What are the social and cultural consequences of seeing manual labor as inferior to exploitation? Does Veblen offer any solutions here?