

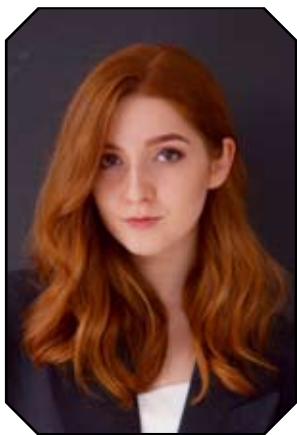
## NEW BOOKS

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# Why do the Rich Consume More Discreetly? A Theory of the Aspirational Class



**Book Review:** Currid-Halkett, E. (2017). *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 254 p.



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### Abstract

This paper is a review of *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, written by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett and published in 2017. Prof. Currid-Halkett leads the Public Policy Department at the University of Southern California. Her research interests tend to focus on the arts, culture, the consumer economy, and the role of culture in geographic and class divides.

Her main idea, portrayed through this book, is that, at the beginning of the 21st century, conspicuous consumption becomes more democratic. In other words, due to the mass-production economy, luxury goods have become significantly more accessible. The abundance of leisure no longer indicates a higher status. As a result, the leisure class is substituted by the aspirational class, whose members reveal their position through cultural signifiers and value systems. The objective of this book is to accurately analyse the portrait of this aspirational class, which transmits completely different consumer behaviour when compared to Veblen's leisure class. The book combines both quantitative and qualitative research designs. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett examines the nationally representative Consumer Expenditure Survey from 1996 to 2014 (covering 35 000 American households per year). In addition, she draws on 15 interviews to explore Americans' consumer practices in greater depth.

This review seeks to emphasize the importance of the author's conclusions regarding studies of consumer behaviour, social stratification, and social class theories. The first part of the paper covers the scientific background of the book and its methodological framework. The second part describes its theoretical frame along with statistical evidence and findings. The paper concludes by highlighting key limitations of the study and suggesting further research directions.

**Keywords:** social status; conspicuous consumption; consumption; leisure class; aspirational class; social stratification.

### Introduction

Everything we do has a social meaning, and so does everything we buy. Consumption is a part of how we define ourselves as individuals; therefore, it has

always been in the spotlight of sociological discourse. In Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's book *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, published in 2017, the study of Americans' consumer behaviour is presented from a timely, original, and disquieting perspective [Easterlin 2020]. The author claims that the traditional leisure class has been replaced by the new aspirational class, which cannot be defined by economics. Today, material goods have become more affordable for people from all walks of life. Therefore, income level and luxury goods possession are no longer signs of high social status. The author asserts that the *aspirational class is a new dominant cultural elite that reveals its class position through cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and value system* (p. 18). The key objective of this book is to accurately analyse the new elite of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which transmits completely different consumer behaviour from its predecessors.

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett is the James Irvine Chair in Urban and Regional Planning and professor of public policy at the University of Southern California. Her research interests tend to focus on the arts, culture, the consumer economy, and the role of culture in geographic and class divides [Currid-Halkett 2020]. In my opinion, her book *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class* is slightly different from her other studies as it follows a more anthropological approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods [Pan 2017]. The reader's first impression is that the book examines the change in consumption patterns and the lifestyle of the new elite. Still, it performs an in-depth investigation into the social inequality dispute and stratification theory. The analysis of both qualitative diary data and quantitative interviews with households provides an overall picture of macro changes in American consumption habits over the past 20 years. Taking into account gender, race, education, geographic location, and a many other demographic characteristics, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett is able to uncover broad trends in Americans' consumption and the way it has changed over time.

This book consists of seven chapters. The first chapter highlights the process of leisure class erosion and the subsequent emergence of the aspirational class. It also provides a theoretical background, introducing readers to Veblen's theory of leisure class and conspicuous consumption. Subsequent chapters focus on a quantitative statistical analysis of Americans' expenditures. For instance, the second chapter examines the consumption trends of Americans by observing different time periods and socio-demographic characteristics, whilst the third chapter provides a profound insight into the inconspicuous consumption of the new elite of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chapters 4–6 explore the aspirational class from a qualitative perspective, examining motherhood as inconspicuous leisure (Chapter 4), conspicuous production analysis (Chapter 5), and the urban comparison of consumption in large and small cities (Chapter 6). The seventh chapter is the conclusion, where the author reconsiders the study's key findings and forecasts the declining fate of the American middle class.

## Methodology

In an attempt to study American consumers' spending behaviours and their socioeconomic characteristics, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett examines the nationally representative annual Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE). The data were kindly supplied by the US Census Bureau under contract with the Bureau of Labour Statistics. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett combines both qualitative and quantitative research designs, which enable her to explore Americans' consumer practices in greater depth. The sample size of the CE covers about 35 000 households across the USA per year. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett investigates an 18-year period using data collected from 1996 to 2014.

The data were gathered from two sources. The first consists of expenditure microdata on small and frequently purchased items—diary data recorded by households over two one-week periods. The second is interview data, which capture large expenditures or items that are bought regularly. In this book, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett mainly uses the microdata, which provide not only individual household-level information on purchased items, but also information on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of each household.

On the basis of early consumption studies [Richards 1991; Douglas, Isherwood 1996; Charles et al. 2009; Fortnum, Mason 2014], Elizabeth divides the concept of consumption into two types: conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is the use of particular goods through which social status is revealed (p. 4). In the statistical analysis, conspicuous consumption as a concept is empirically made up of 19 expenditure categories, each of which consists of a specific set of variables (see Table 1). According to Veblen's theory, this type of consumption was typical for the leisure class — “a wealthy and idle group who vainly and incessantly demonstrated their social and economic position through material goods, many of which were useless items” (p. 4).

Table 1

**Category Set of the Conspicuous Consumption Concept**

<b>Conspicuous Consumption</b>
Food beverage away from home
Alcoholic beverage away from home
Household textiles
Furniture
Refrigerator and oven
Housewares
Household miscellaneous
Men's/women's/boy's/girl's/infant clothing ( <i>5 separate categories</i> )
Footwear
Watches, jewellery, and luggage
Vehicle
TV and audio
Boat and motors
Personal care products
Funeral

Source: [Currid-Halkett 2017: 202].

However, at the beginning of the 21st century, conspicuous consumption becomes more democratic and discreet. Along with this process, the leisure class is being eroded, and the abundance of leisure no longer indicates a higher status [Gershuny 2000; Lesnard 2003]. The leisure class is being substituted by the aspirational class, which reveals its position through cultural signifiers and value systems. Members of the aspirational class tend to consume fewer ostentatious items and more goods that are cheaper but that reflect value and cultural capital (p. 22). In order to empirically create the concept of inconspicuous consumption, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett unites 15 expenditure categories, which are both experience-driven and labour-intensive, and each of which also consists of a specific set of variables (see Table 2). The statistical analysis is based on regression models, correlations, and descriptive statistics. Data management is performed by STATA (version 11.1).

Table 2

## Category Set of the Inconspicuous Consumption Concept

Category	Set of Categories
<b>Experience-driven</b>	Medical services Fees and admissions Musical instruments and other entertainment Pets, toys, hobbies, and playground equipment Other entertainment Personal care services Reading Tuition Miscellaneous Cash contributions
<b>Labour-intensive</b>	Alcoholic beverage at home Mattress and springs Repairing of clothing, watches, etc. Automobile service clubs Airline, taxi, and ship fares

Source: [Currid-Halkett 2017: 205].

In addition to this quantitative research design, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett draws on 15 interviews with small business owners, public health experts, and scholars and media reports. She also takes into account her anthropological experience and personal reflections. The combination of both a quantitative and qualitative research design enables her to examine the consumption behaviour and trends from various perspectives.

### Is Veblen Still Relevant Today?

The theoretical framework of the research is mainly based on Veblen's paper *The Theory of the Leisure Class* [1889], where he expresses the relationship between material goods and social status in late 19<sup>th</sup> century society. In this work, Veblen first mentions the phenomenon of *conspicuous consumption*—the practice of purchasing goods or services to publicly display wealth rather than to cover basic needs. According to classical economic theory, the upper bourgeoisie may seem to behave irrationally. From one perspective, the elite neglects the principle of utility maximisation and expenditure minimisation and follows wasteful consumption patterns. From another perspective, the actions of the upper class are considered to be quite reasonable as luxurious goods and fashionable activities confirm and strengthen their position in the social hierarchy. The lower classes of society also follow certain models of consumer behaviour, copying the upper classes' *conspicuous consumption* to maintain their position in the social hierarchy.

According to Veblen's theory, things we acquire (large homes, sports cars, fine china) and how we use them (the way we place our utensils upon finishing a meal) demonstrate our social status. Pierre Bourdieu shared common ideas in his paper *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* in 1984, claiming that “status emerges from prosaic forms and signs, from what we live” (p. 3).

*Do I prefer kissing a pretty girl to a charwoman because even a janitor can kiss a charwoman—or because the pretty girl looks better, smells better and kisses better?* (p. 4)

Elites have traditionally demonstrated superiority by flaunting their wealth through luxurious items they can afford. Not long ago, wearing a Rolex watch and owning knockoff Gucci and Hermès handbags used to indicate the high social position of a person. However, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett examines how nowadays the affirmation of status is undergoing a dramatic transformation. She claims that the signs of social status have become more inconspicuous and that material goods are no longer a clear signal of social position. But does it mean that class stratification is still present today?

*Thorstein Veblen's view of consumption in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still applies today, but society and class are far more complicated. Many of us have access to the items that were then status markers of only the rich. Acquiring those status markers does not indicate one's financial well-being, let alone happiness or fulfilment. (p. 196)*

Undoubtedly, the answer is negative. Along with this transformation, neither the signs of class position nor class inequality have disappeared. The new elite of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has simply been shifted around a new set of values that reinforces its class position in less obvious ways. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett declares that economic capital becomes outmoded, yielding its place to cultural capital, in which the upper classes of society are more willing to invest. Thus, knowledge and symbols revealing cultural capital determine socially and environmentally conscious values that set the upper class apart from everyone else. That is why *a \$2 heirloom tomato purchased from a farmers' market is so symbolically weighty and a white Range Rover is not* (p. 19). Nevertheless, new signs of distinction transmit social privilege just as efficiently as luxurious material goods, proving a high social position in Thorstein Veblen's theory, which ensures us that his ideas are still relevant today.

## Wealth no Longer Determines Superior Social Status

The leisure class, as a wealthy and idle group who demonstrated their social and economic position through material goods (many of which were useless), are being replaced by self-conscious aspirational class representatives. As well as *conspicuous consumption*, which tends to be superseded by *inconspicuous consumption* as the result of the accessibility of material consumption and the rising value of investing in education, retirement, healthcare, etc., Elizabeth Currid-Halkett defines the *aspirational class* as a group of individuals who reveal their class position through cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and value systems.

*In the twenty-first century, social status emerges not simply from cars or watches but from inaccessible cues, information, and investments. For the aspirational class these signifiers are what I call "inconspicuous consumption"—that is, more subtle, less materialistic forms of conveying status particularly to others in-the-know. Sometimes these consumption choices aren't even intended to display status at all. Whether they are extraordinarily expensive versions of goods everyone buys, or investments in the life chances of their children, these new forms of inconspicuous consumption are goods and services purchased for the sake of making one's life easier, improving well-being (both intellectual and physical). Yet through both prosaic and profound inconspicuous consumption, these elites (whether the culturally rich aspirational class or just the rich) entrench their and their children's socioeconomic position. (p. 49)*

Once you have read *The Sum of Small Things*, you may find you have a desire to subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal* or to start eating organic food. Still, belonging to the aspirational class is not that easy. To prove this idea, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett analyses the vast amount of statistical data provided by the CE—the annual nationally representative survey of American consumer behaviour conducted by the US Census Bureau. In addition, the author conducts 15 in-depth interviews in an attempt to reveal the deeper meaning of inconspicuous consumption patterns.

One of the most unexpected findings is that the share of the household budget devoted to conspicuous consumption of those with modest incomes is higher than for rich households. This tendency becomes more vivid in 2007–2013 during the Great Depression. This evidence allows Elizabeth Currid-Halkett to conclude that the upper class does not set itself apart through its greater consumption of luxury goods. The aspirational class is formed through a collective consciousness upheld by specific values and acquired knowledge. In other words, instead of income level, the new elite is tied by a shared set of cultural practices and social norms.

*Today's aspirational class prizes ideas, cultural and social awareness and the acquisition of knowledge in forming ideas and making choices ranging from their careers to the type of sliced bread they purchase at the grocery store (p. 10).*

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett claims that knowledge and cultural capital are used by aspirational class representatives to act more consciously and make more informed decisions: *what to eat, how to treat the environment, and how to be better parents, more productive workers and more informed customers* (p. 65). Therefore, the aspiration to be better versions of themselves in all aspects of their lives creates a new class of contemporary elite—those individuals who read cultural commentaries, are up to date on the news, and usually follow an ecological lifestyle.

## Limitations

It is necessary to point out the book's strengths and weaknesses. An undoubtable pro of the *The Sum of Small Things* is that it is crafted in popular language, following a clear and engaging style. The use of compelling examples of consumption patterns appeals to a general audience, making the book a true bestseller. Also, the use of mixed research designs produces a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the research area.

Despite its strengths, *The Sum of Small Things* has its limitations. The scientific community has raised some concerns about this book. According to Joel Stillerman's review, the major drawback of this book is its *disappointing use of social science theory* (p. 1568). The arguments and hypotheses that the author makes are not supported by a strong theoretical base. Although Veblen's key theory is described in detail, other complex theories from Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Daniel Miller, and other sociologists are presented rather briefly. For instance, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett claims that Mary Douglas and Daniel Miller state that *status has always consumed us* (p. 3). In fact, as Joel Stillerman mentions in his review, those authors sharply criticize Veblen's status-based argument and propose an alternative "relational" approach. Besides, "a more careful reading of Bourdieu might lead the author to consider the conflicts between intellectuals and business professionals rather than viewing them as forming a unified group" [Stillerman 2019]. De Keere follows the same idea and criticizes *The Sum of Small Things* for the lack of Bourdieu's theory: "Instead of freeing you as a reader from Bourdieu's heavy (and often too dominant) legacy, this book makes you miss his work" [Keere 2018].

Using a combination of research methods seems to be a good idea in terms of analysing the consumption patterns of Americans from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. As the CE covers approximately 7 000 households across the country and the sample size of the annual dataset is about 35 000 consumer units, the research on consumers' spending behaviours and their socioeconomic characteristics seems to be quite comprehensive and accurate.

The discussed book, *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, is structured around the central idea that contemporary consumption patterns have recently been modified. Although some upper-class representatives still purchase yachts, luxury limousines, and estates, dramatic changes in the elite's consumption behaviour arise from its educated, highly intellectual stratum—the *aspirational class*. Moreover, there is no clear operationalization of the *aspirational class* as the main concept. There is a wide range of individuals

who may potentially belong to this stratum: from freelancers to start-up founders or university professors. In this case, providing more accurate criteria in terms of belonging to this class would shed light on this discrepancy.

It is plausible that a number of methodological limitations could have influenced the results obtained. Firstly, there is a lack of information on the qualitative research design and the framework used for the collection and analysis of the 15 in-depth interviews. It is also unclear how the author coped with the problem of low ecological validity and the inability to find out how respondents actually behave and consume in real situations. Secondly, according to the review published in *The Economist*, “the book unearths evocative differences between big American cities and makes clear that the “aspirational class” is almost exclusively coastal and urban” [The Economist 2017]. Still, such categories of Americans as business-minded rich in politically conservative states are excluded from the analysis, which may yield a lopsided portrait of the top of the income pile. Thirdly, the book lacks an analysis of consumption patterns among lower classes, focusing more on upper-class consumption behaviours. “Perhaps a sequel might explore the values of Sun Belt suburbanites, and how this other half of privileged Americans signal status through their spending” [The Economist 2017]. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett claims that *the limitations of her landscape are due to the data at hand, but the expanse of these phenomena is in evidence worldwide* [p. 196]. Still, this argument seems to be quite unjustified. All these aspects have a negative impact on the understanding of the qualitative data interpretations obtained during the qualitative analysis.

## For Further Discussion

To sum up, the book offers valuable statistical analyses and is written in an engaging style but falls short in developing a novel theory in terms of class, status, and consumption. Overall, *The Sum of Small Things* is an important initial step towards the study of modern consumer behaviour and the *aspirational class*. It greatly contributes to the scientific field of consumer behaviour research. On the basis of the findings presented in this book, we see how cultural capital leads to lifestyle shifts not only for the new American elite but for people from all walks of life.

The present findings might help find an answer to how Americans consume today. Still, more research into stratification theory and to examine the lower social classes is quite necessary before obtaining a definitive answer to this question. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett is sure that the new consumption patterns of the *aspirational class* make individuals into happier and more engaged members of society. From my point of view, this hypothesis seems to be a new objective for further research.

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