The Decadent Performance of the Jet-Set

The Leisure Class Revisited

Peter E. J. Buiks*

Samenvatting

Het artikel biedt een kultuursociologische analyse van de gedrags- en consumptiepatronen van de Jet-Set. Een ‘set’ individuen met een zeer kleurrijke, flamboyante, maar vooral dekadente levenswijze. Door middel van een kritische analyse van het, door de recente publikatie van de Nederlandse vertaling weer actueel geworden, werk van Thornstein Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class*, pogen we karakteristieke overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen ‘leisure class’ en Jet-Set aan te tonen. Hierbij houden we vooral rekening met de invloed van structurele en kulturele ontwikkelingen en veranderingen, die plaatsgevonden hebben sedert de publikatie van dit werk. Tevens gaan we na of de Jet-Set gezien kan worden als een ‘Power Elite’, waarbij we refereren aan recente financieel-economische ontwikkelingen en hun consequenties voor de Jet-Set (fusies, erfenis-perikelen etc.).

In de volgende hoofdstukken is getracht de aard van het karakteristieke gedragspatroon van de Jet-Set te analyseren. Allereerst door toepassing van het begrippenkader van Erving Goffman, vervolgens door de gedrags- en consumptie patronen van de Jet-Set in relatie te brengen met een dominant kenmerk van de hedendaagse westere kultuur: dekadentie.

1. Introduction

From time to time he invites his friends to a dinner party in one of his favourite restaurants in Munich (‘Franziskaner’). If he wants music his

court servants quickly rush to hire Los Paragayos, court band of the German Jêt-Set, at 3,000,— Mark. The party proceeds in a Father's Day atmosphere and reaches its climax in an impressive glass damage. If, thanks to the smash-and-crash pleasure, the heaps of broken glass reach a considerable height, his guests call this ritual a 'Kristallnacht'.

For our second example we chose a Dane, Mr. Simon S., who once ordered a steak for his coat made of sable fur. In the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen he ordered a place for his walking-stick. Among his many cars are two Mercedes 600 equiped with living-room milieu in the back part of the car.

These are not examples of a long forgotten past. Both persons are distinguished members of the contemporary 'pleasure society'. The first example features Mr. Friedrich Karl F., absolute monarch over the largest industrial family-property of Germany: about 300 companies with an annual turnover of some 20 milliard DM. Mr. S. himself is a fiftyfold Kronen millionaire, he also owns an airfleet and a travel-agency, worth more than 100 million Kronen.

In our opinion one should not take Torstein Veblen's view, that the 'leisure class' is an outlived, and anachronic phenomenon, serious. This may be true of the 'leisure class' in its aristocratic form:

We can observe this in the degeneration of the once famous 'Clubs' of London. Nowadays the clubcommittees try to make the clubs more attractive (or 'dishonour' them) by organizing dance-parties, and by introducing Discothèques. In the evenings a ghost goes about through the huge dining-rooms and libraries, the ghost of decadence, inflation, impoverishment and of growing grey. Even women are tolerated which is a definite symbol of their decadence. They are only allowed to come in through the backdoor of course, but nevertheless they are tolerated!

If we look at the two conditions Veblen mentions, for the development of a 'leisure class', we'll even have to expect an increasing 'leisure class'. His first condition is structural: the means of subsistence should be so easily obtained that a considerable part of society can be exempted from daily labour. As we are at the beginning of a transition to a post-industrial society, the 'leisure class' should be expected to increase. The second condition for the development of a 'leisure class', mentioned by Veblen, is a cultural condition: society must have a rapacious way of living (the habit of harming each other by means of violence or trick). Veblen points out that such a way of living is stimulated by the development of technology
and by the use of tools. This means that Veblen again gave us a reason to expect the continuous existence of a 'leisure class'.

In the transition to a post-industrial society we see the emergence of a large and colourful 'leisure class', of a new cultural type: the Jet-Set? We use this name to describe an international but more or less exclusive 'group' of rich businessmen, descendants of mostly not governing dynasties, sportsmen (tennis etc.), playboys, and artists of divergent plumage. The name implies an ironically meant allusion to the fact that the members of the Jet-Set use to travel all over the world by jetplanes, to meet each other at various festivities in the most divergent places in the world ('free-places', see our explanation in Ch. 4 point e). Mostly its members are accompanied by a more or less comprehensive service-team which, by attending to the personal welfare of the master, plays an important role in the 'impression management' of the Jet-Set (See Ch. 5.2.).

Mr. F., for instance, of our first example has a service-team composed of: driver, secretaries, masseur, forester, body-guard, and in the winter 2 ski-instructors.

It is possible that a service-team consists for the greater part of women. The former president of an investment company (IOS) employs a service-team of changing composition of 4 to 40 women. And Mr. S., owner of the travel-agency, has a service-team of 4 private 'secretaries' at his disposal, wearing leopard coats as their uniform.

The difficulty in defining this expression, especially in conventional sociological terms, is caused by the fact that it concerns a set of individuals, not so much characterized by a definite social structure, nor by a definite social organization, but characterized by a certain 'performance'. 'A performance may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.'

Whereas interaction, according to most of the sociologists, stands for: the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in another's immediate physical presence.

The performance characterizing the Jet-Set consists of a certain pattern of behaviour and consumption. An analysis of the nature of this performance is the subject of the last two chapters of our article. This analysis will be made in relation to one of the most dominant cultural characteristics of
our society; decadence. In the two preceding chapters we will consider the similarities and differences between Veblen’s ‘leisure class’ and the Jet-Set. We undertake this critical analysis of Veblen’s work against the background of the structural and cultural changes and developments that took place since his brilliant study: *The theory of the leisure class*, was published (1899). The other chapter (Ch. 4) tries to explain in what sense the Jet-Set challenges sociology and conventional sociological processes and concepts.

2. The Jet-Set, a ‘leisure class’?

2.1 Thorstein Veblen

The story of Thorstein Veblen is the story of a complete ‘failure’. He never measured up to the traditional American standards of success. And what’s more: he could not care less! Veblen was an old-fashioned, individualistic, recalcitrant personality. He never had a ‘decent’ academic career. On this point he followed the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology: Saint-Simon and Comte. But there is another, more important, respect in which Veblen was directly related to the classical sociologists: Veblen was a cultural sociologist, like Comte, Durkheim, Marx, Spencer and Weber. The dominant subject of his sociology was analysis of the most essential characteristics of the total society and time-period in which he lived. In our opinion it is not very surprising that it was Thorstein Veblen, the ‘enfant terrible’ of western sociology, who wrote a most penetrating study on America’s elite. His work is the intellectual expression of his own position with respect to the social situation.

After he had finished his study (Ph. D. in Yale, 1884), and could not find a job, he returned to his father’s farm where he stayed six or seven years. His first academic job was at the university of Chicago. Later on he worked in Stanford. From both jobs he was forced to resign, because he refused to stop being attractive to girls and change his way of living. Then the period began in which Veblen wrote four or five of his best books, living in the cellar of a house of a colleague. He died in a cottage in the woods of Stanford in August 1929.

The farm, the cellar and the cottage were Veblen’s ‘freplaces’. Together with his unorthodox way of living they enabled him to maintain his position of non-commitment. This made it possible for Veblen to take that distance which was necessary for his work. In other words: it took a Thorstein Veblen to make a penetrating study of America’s ‘nouveau
riche'. There's one thing however, we must not forget: *The theory of the leisure class* was published in 1899. In the meantime certain structural, cultural, political and economical developments and changes have taken place, some of which Veblen underestimated while others were unknown to him at that time. The most important of these developments are: increasing prosperity, the ongoing emancipation of women, and the electronic revolution in mass-communication. We expect that a critical analysis of Veblen's study will advance our understanding of the Jet-Set.

The Jet-Set certainly is a 'leisure class'. Veblen mentions being exempted from every kind of useful labour as the hallmark of the 'leisure class'.

'Abstention from labour is the conventional evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social standing...'

'Prescription ends by making labour not only disreputable in the eyes of the community, but morally impossible to the noble, freeborn man, and incompatible with a worthy life.'

In their attitude labour is tabooed by the members of the Jet-Set; in their behavior they try to realize that attitude as much as possible. Some of the (older) members of the Jet-Set have to compromise themselves with a last residue of labour, because they still maintain a relation with the production process. Mr. F. we mentioned above, is an example of this industrial cell of the Jet-Set. If we look at the descendants of these people, however, we can discover what the trend for the near future will be: The younger generation is definitely more interested in 'leisure' than in labour, as we will explain later on. An exhibitional avoidance of all useful labour characterizes the way of living of the Jet-Set.

According to the servants of the wife of the late Aristoteles Onassis, her daily activities are as follows: Between 8 and 9 o'clock she wakes up and uses breakfast in her bed. After breakfast she spends several hours in the bathroom, where the fixing of her make-up turns out to be one of the most important activities of this woman. Next she goes walking. In the afternoon she goes shopping and buys, and buys *ad infinitum*.

Veblen didn't mean to say, however, that all activity has to be tabooed:

'... the term 'leisure, as here used, does not connote indolence or quiescence. What it connotes is non-productive consumption of time.'
Time is consumed non-productively (1) from a sense of the unworthiness of productive work, and (2) as an evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness.\textsuperscript{12}

At this point we touch upon an important difference between Veblen's 'leisure class' and the Jet-Set. As activities with which the 'leisure class' does occupy itself, Veblen mentions: government, warfare, sport and religious commitments.\textsuperscript{13} The Jet-Set considers most of these activities as too much labour-like (e.g. government and warfare), while most of its members do not seem to be oppressed by religious commitments. The activities of the Jet-Set are even more typical of what Veblen means by 'leisure': sport, entertainment, sex, showbusiness, parties, travelling, and consumption. The activities of the Jet-Set are much more of a play-type!

2.2. 'Conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous leisure'

In order to gain and to keep social prestige being wealthy is not enough: Wealth has to be demonstrated in the form of 'conspicuous consumption' or 'conspicuous leisure'. To Veblen clothes were the consumption article most suitable to demonstrate wealth:

'... in addition to showing that wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it also can be shown, in the same stroke, that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood...'\textsuperscript{14}

'It not only shows that the wearer is able to consume a relatively large value, but it argues at the same time that he consumes without producing.'\textsuperscript{15} This effect is realized by wearing clothes which make it impossible for the wearer to work.

In addition to clothes we would like to point to another interesting means of demonstrating a pecuniary culture, frequently used nowadays by the Jet-Set: nakedness. If nakedness shows a sunburnt body, it is a very effective way of demonstrating 'leisure'. The well-tanned body is the result of many hours, days, yes even of many years of sun-bathing, and (or) of hundreds of hours spent in a solarium. This makes a naked sunburnt body the best proof of a life of 'leisure'! It also explains why the favourite free-places of the Jet-Set are all sunny places (e.g. Saint-Tropez and Monte Carlo)!

Veblen recognizes the fact that the 'leisure class' is faced with the difficulty of proving its public that it also does not have to compromise itself by productive or useful labour, during their absence. This can be
done by showing the concrete and lasting results of the time they spent while their public was absent. At this point also, nakedness offers interesting possibilities to gain social prestige. In our culture it is still possible to create a shock-effect by nakedness and sexuality. If you do so, you should know however, that your shock-effect can cause other shock-effects (the feedback from your social environment). The risk you run of being sacked is only one example. So, creating shock-effects is something not everybody can afford. It requires a strong unassailable social position, in which you are relatively inviolable with respect to the social consequences of unadjustment and deviance. The possibilities offered by nakedness and sexuality are recognized by the Jet-Set. And both means of advertising one's wealth are extensively being used by the Jet-Set: Clothes which expose large parts of the body (evening-dresses, bikinis etc.); having pictures made while being more or less naked (pictures which are published in magazines all over the world); and in several types of nudism.

A famous French movie-star enjoys making trips in a boat near Saint-Tropez, while showing her bronzed body and having pictures made.

Veblen does not even mention sexuality in his *Theory of the leisure class*. He names good manners, politeness, a sense of decorum, rule prescriptions and ceremonial as ways to prove that one is also living a life of leisure in the time the public is absent!

There is another difference between the 'leisure class' and the Jet-Set. The modern development of mass media offers the Jet-Set a tremendous support in its effort to demonstrate leisure and consumption. The modern communication media are especially valuable as means of 'Impression management' (See our Ch. 5). At the same time however the necessity of advertising one's wealth became more important. This is why we meet people like public relations officers and publicity agents in the service-team employed by several members of the Jet-Set.

2.3. Progressive or conservative?

Veblen's 'leisure class' is a conservative class:

'They are not required under penalty of forfeiture to change their habits of life and their theoretical views of the external world to suit the demands of an altered industrial technique, since they are not in the full sense an organic part of the industrial community.'

389
In a structural sense (politically and economically) the Jet-Set indeed is a conservative class, just like the ‘leisure class’. Its members have no intention to support structural changes, as long as the reward system of a society allows them to be rewarded without having to achieve anything. But here Veblen’s point of view is too economical. The Jet-Set is indeed forced from time to time to change its pattern of behaviour. This, however, is not so much caused by economical or structural facts. The changes in its behaviour are forced in a cultural way. The ‘leisure class’ has the task of retarding progress, and to guard that which is already out-dated. Veblen even speaks of a resistance against changes in the cultural pattern, and of an instinctive aversion to any deviation from traditional patterns of action and thinking. This is not true where the Jet-Set is concerned. From a cultural point of view the Jet-Set has to be progressive! If the Jet-Set wants to maintain a ‘safe’ distance from the masses, in other words if it wants to maintain its social prestige, it has to stay ahead of certain developments and changes in society (We will return to this point in Ch. 6). Moreover, to adjust oneself to traditional institutionalized patterns of behavior is possible for everybody. Neglecting them, deviance, cannot be afforded by all members of society. Deviance is a privilege of the Jet-Set and other ‘outsiders’. The Jet-Set, for example, tries to appear at a party in anything but the conventional smoking.

Rudolf Moshammer, a German tailor, cunningly exploited this position of the Jet-Set: He managed to convince his Jet-Set clientele of the fact that it was better for them to appear in one of his curious evening-cuts, instead of in evening-dress or smoking. This being one of the possibilities, as Moshammer says, to avoid that... the gentlemen look as if they were the personnel.

2.4. Women’s liberation and prosperity

Women’s liberation is an example of a social development which produced some cultural changes in the Jet-Set, although these changes are quite different from those it produced in society as a whole. It is also again an example of a development for which Veblen had no eye. In the ‘leisure class’ it is expected of the woman to consume much and conspicuously in order to increase the prestige and the glory of her husband or of any other natural (financial) guardian. Many young self-conscious women of the Jet-Set managed to put their partners in fashionable outfits. Their way of
emancipation exists in not being alone as elitarian furred animals exposing prosperity.\textsuperscript{20}

Thorstein Veblen develops his ideas about the 'leisure class', starting from the supposition that prosperity is limited in extent. He also didn’t leave enough room for the possibility of increasing prosperity.\textsuperscript{21} The years that have passed since 1899, showed us that an enormous growth in the extent and in the distribution of prosperity was possible. As he didn’t foresee this development he supposed the wealth of the 'leisure class' directly meant the poverty of the masses. In such a situation the difference between the 'leisure class' and the other parts of society is structurally warranted. In a society however, in which a growing number of people participates in a growing prosperity, a certain massification and a \textit{cultural levelling} (reduction of differences in the behavior- and consumption-pattern of people) become characteristic features. In such a society, to distinguish oneself from the ordinary people becomes problematic. Clothes, luxury end money are items everybody possesses (to some extent). It this problem with which the Jet-Set is so cruelly faced. The struggle of the Jet-Set to maintain its own identity against the oppressive force of a society characterized by cultural levelling, forms the subject of our last two chapters. First we’ll try to answer the next question:

\textbf{3. The Jet-Set, a Power Elite?}

The 'leisure class' is an elite equipped with a power to decide, in other words a Power Elite.

‘For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of social structure...’\textsuperscript{22}

C. Wright Mills regrets that Veblen didn’t realize that his 'leisure class' was a power elite.\textsuperscript{23}

The case is totally different where the Jet-Set is concerned. The Jet-Set is no power elite. People that belong to the power elite derive their power from institutional positions, mainly military, political and industrial positions. The members of the Jet-Set are exempted from such positions,
and accordingly they do not have the power these positions are invested with. (See also the characteristic activities of the Jet-Set compared with those of the ‘leisure class’ in Ch. 2). We’ll have to make an exception for the industrial cell of the Jet-Set which still does control positions invested with power. In the following paragraphs, however, we will point out the structural, economical and cultural factors which rapidly force this part of the Jet-Set to give up those positions. It is not only that the Jet-Set does not occupy positions invested with power, a large part of the Jet-Set even derived its wealth from the fact that they were bought out of those positions! We shall give some examples to illustrate this development. In 1929 Adam Opel sold his factories to the Americans (General Motors). This furnished an important part of the money which enables the well-known good-for-nothing and playboy G.S. to live his luxurious life. Arndt von B. und H., ‘the weak heir of the iron armourers of the Third Reich’ (Krupp), gave up all his rights. In return he receives every year the millions he needs for his flamboyant way of living in Munich, Salzburg and Morocco.24

The younger generation in the Jet-Set is more interested in money than in positions invested with power. To these ‘heirs’ ‘power’ means labour, while money means leisure. These changing values among the younger generation of the Jet-Set even are the main cause of the inheritance-problems which trouble various industrial family-dynasties nowadays. They all want their part, and they want it now! There are many recent examples. Behind the spectacular sale of 29 percent of all Mercedes-shares to the Deutsche Bank by the Flick-empire, were inheritance-problems. At the time the shares were sold several persons were feeding upon the loot like Egyptian vultures. The proceeds (two milliard Mark) were going to be used to buy out three heirs of the third generation: Gert-Rudolf, Friedrich-Christian and Dagmar. The first two are known in Germany as ‘Mick und Muck’. At the end of 1975 both sprouts will receive 714 million Mark each, and become the wealthiest bachelors of Germany.25

‘Lieber Mick und Muck als playboy Krupp!’, ran a letter to a German magazine. Another letter: ‘The Flick-nephews worked two years and are now retiring with an interest of some 2 milliard. I have worked for 47 years. My interest amounts to DM 734,20.’26

There are several factors which allow us to conclude that this trend will continue in the near future. This trend even is an aspect of our transition
to a post-industrial society, in which more and more people will become
in a lesser degree related to the production-process. Apart from the
changing values among the younger generation of the Jet-Set, many
family-owned companies have to be sold because of lack of capital. Other
people will be bought out in case of fusion with national or multi-national
companies.

In Germany this happened to several families: Haniel (Gütehoffnung-
hütte), Stinnes, Henschel and Thyssen. (Francesca T. is a well-known
member of the German Jet-Set).

What Veblen said of the 'leisure class' becomes even more true of the
Jet-Set: They don't live in industrial society, they live by industrial society.

4. Jet-Set versus sociological processes

Yet, there is one respect in which the Jet-Set could be called a power
elite: It has a certain power over sociological processes and phenomena!
Not only material things are for sale, certain sociological processes are also
for sale. We will explain this thesis with a few examples concerning the
following sociological processes and phenomena: deviance, social control,
institutionalisation, bureaucracy and 'Entzauberung der Welt'.

a. If one possesses more of the rewards distributed by the reward-system
of a certain society, in order to stimulate those patterns of behaviour
which are favourable or necessary to that society, the easier one can
afford to deviate from conventional institutionalised patterns of behaviour.
One of Homan's propositions can clarify this:
'The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular
reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes to
him.'

If we want to apply this to the Jet-Set we only have to reverse his third
proposition, after which it sounds as follows: 'The less valuable the reward
of an activity is to a person the less likely he is to perform the activity.'
When the rewards a society operates lose their rewarding nature, society
loses its influence (social control) on the behavior of the people concerned!
Such a situation is a favourable condition for deviance.

b. Bureaucracy is a sociological phenomenon to which we are all sub-
jected. But the Jet-Set is able to soothe the effects of it. You will never see a member of the Jet-Set being in the queue for several hours in order to receive some vague form. They just don’t have to accept being bullied by bureaucratic procedures. Their service-teams keep them free from the caprices of bureaucratic monsters. The law offers a good example. For ordinary people the procedures of the law are tormenting. Sometimes they even feel intimidated by the bureaucratic nature of these procedures, and relinquish trying to get their rights. Whereas the Jet-Set employs its own legal experts.

c. As we have shown the Jet-Set is, to a certain extent, in a position from which it is possible to avoid being socially controlled. Now we would like to demonstrate the fact that, in many ways, they control the social. Mr. S. once featured in a groupsex party while being photographed. At first he didn’t care that the people could see he was a ‘swinger’. But 24 hours after the ‘swinging’, he thought different, although Mr. S. is rather publicity eager, and protested against the the publication of he pictures in a Danish journal. He gave permission to publish only three photographs which he selected himself. When a Swedish paper published a complete report, S. immediately mobilized his Swedish lawyers in order to sue the newspaper for damages. Rudolf Moshammer, tailor of Mr. F., was pressed by F’s employees to try to prevent Der Spiegel from publishing the little curiosity that Mr. F. paid 1800 Mark for a pre-bleached jeans-outfit. The Jet-Set controls what’s being published about them. They also control the social situation in which they are:

In the main office of his company in Düsseldorf, even the exact place where Mr. F.’s bureau is situated is being kept secret.

If he likes to ski his ski-instructors travel ahead to select the virginal snow-slopes in the Arlberg, in the U.S.-state Utah or in the mountains of Canada, which might please the master. They especially see to the important fact that Mr. F. does not have to be compromised by contacts with ‘ordinary’ skiers, among whom the queen of the Netherlands and, from time to time, even the sjah of Persia.

d. ‘Entzauberung der Welt’ is Weber’s term for the consequences of the ongoing rationalisation of life through science. This process stimulates the belief that there are no secret powers and that everything can be rationally calculated, if you only want to do so. To many people the ‘Entzauberung der Welt’ is a social fact they have to accept, to the Jet-Set it is a social fact that can be changed. The Jet-Set has the possibilities to create irrational forms of behavior and mystifications, wherever and whenever
they like (See our next Ch.). By controlling information and by controlling social situations, they manage to create their own ‘Magical Mystery Tour’, full of irrationalities, rituals and enchantment:

Hardly three dozen guests were present at Mr. F.’s New Year’s party in Seeshaupt. At the climax of the party they witnessed fireworks with an estimated value of: 40,000 Mark.33

e. One of the possibilities people have to reduce the influence of society on their behavior is to create free-places. Social settings in which the normal level of structural conditioning (the processes through which a society stimulates and generates those forms of behavior favourable or necessary to its nature, and represses those unfavourable to its nature) is reduced. Free-places are social situations over which the individual has an unusual degree of control (individual conditioning). The living-room, club, certain departments of universities, they all can serve as free-places. At this point the Jet-Set reaches the climax of its sociological power. The Jet-Set has ample, seemingly unlimited, possibilities at its disposal to create free-places. The free-places are also what Goffman calls ‘backstage’, the place were the performance of the Jet-Set is prepared.34 The late Mr. Onassis possessed an entire island protected from the rest of society by body-guards. Also several cities are known as free-places of the Jet-Set: Monte-Carlo, Cannes, Saint-Tropez, Munich, Paris etc.

5. The Jet-Set and ‘The presentation of Self’

In this and in the following part of the article we propose to investigate the nature of the performance by which the Jet-Set is characterized. This performance has a certain pattern of behaviour (‘conspicuous leisure’) and a specific pattern of consumption (‘conspicuous consumption’) as its defining elements. In doing so we find the concepts Goffman developed in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (1959) very workable. The Jet-Set can be seen as a ‘performance team’: ‘... a set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine.’35 Among its members ‘... we find that a certain familiarity prevails, solidarity is likely to develop, and that secrets that could give the show away are shared and kept.’36 This procures a kind of latent working consensus with regard to the necessity of maintaining a given projected definition of the situation.37 The whole performance of the Jet-Set is aimed at realizing social prestige by its basic elements: leisure and consumption. Here we touch upon the question
whether this performance is ‘rational’ in itself, whether it is adapted to the goal it tries to realize: social prestige.

Leo Lowenthal, in his analysis of biographies in popular magazines, already found out that the interest of the reader (in the first part of the 20th century) wasn’t aimed any more at examples of labour (industrialists, employers, doctors, statesman etc.), but at examples of leisure. The heroes of the past were idols of production, whereas the heroes of today are idols of leisure and consumption. This situation, however, is culturally conditioned. It is true for a capitalist society. In a communist society like China for instance, it is the other way around. In a capitalist society property, leisure and consumption indeed constitute the socially recognized basis of prestige. The more our society develops into a post-industrial society, the more important leisure and consumption will become as basis of social prestige. This means that, in this respect, we’ll have to consider the performance of the Jet-Set as a perfectly rational procedure. In order to be effective however, the performance has to be exhibited. Therefore is it a necessity for the Jet-Set, as a performance-team, to control the expression it gives off; which means: Impression Management, within the Jet-Set itself (internally) and in relation to its audience (externally).

5.1. Internal impression management

Within the Jet-Set communication is controlled by: ‘Symbolic Interaction’. The Jet-Set operates an elaborated sign-system to guide communication between its members. The signals must be understandable to members, and be available for all members of the performance-team. To be available, in case of the Jet-Set, means: the signals have to be for sale. The following items are some of the signals that meet these conditions: Dunhill pipes at 5000 Mark, shirts from Valentino at 500 Mark, and rifles made by Purdey in Great Britain from 40.000 Mark. But the signals can even have a more symbolic nature. For all members of the Jet-Set the initials LV, are a signal which tells them they are dealing with a member of the performance-team. These are not just the initials of the Parisian suitcase-manufacturer Louis Vuitton: they indicate a mode of life! LV stands for Jet-Set, just like GG. Guccio Gucci, descendant from an Italian dynasty of bag-makers, also understood the Jet-Set’s need for purchasable signals. That’s why he amply spices his shoes, clothes, bags and belts with his name.

The fact that these symbols are for sale leads to extensive dabbling, which is a historical bourgeois-feature. The symbols are dramatically
being misused by 'common' people of the lower-upper class and even of the middle class. By buying the sacred symbols of the Jet-Set they hope to become part of a performance-team with which they have nothing to do (anticipatory socialization).

5.2. External impression management

The expression the Jet-Set gives off also has to be controlled in relation to the audience, in order to make sure that it produces the desired social prestige. Exhibitional entertainment and an extremely expensive and personnel-intensive service-team offer possibilities in this respect, as we have already said. We've also mentioned the control over publicity that the Jet-Set has. Here it turns out to be an important instrument of external impression management (See our examples in Ch. 4). Some of the remarks C. Wright Mills makes about publicity in relation to the 'celebrities' are also in force with respect to the Jet-Set:

'In the world of the celebrity, the hierarchy of publicity has replaced the hierarchy of descent and even great wealth.'

'Cafe society is above all founded upon publicity. Its members often seem to live for the exhibitionist mention of their doings and relations by social chroniclers and gossip columnists.'

Effective impression management requires a dualistic technique: In the expression the Jet-Set gives off information which supports the impression, the Jet-Set tries to foster by its performance, must be stimulated. While at the same time all information and activities disruptive to this impression, in the eyes of its audience, should be camouflaged:

'This will involve the overcommunication of some facts and the under-communication of others ... the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them.'

This is why ladies of the pecuniary nobility and professionally settled female rebels of the left-wing intelligentsia prefer to take their purchases out of the expensive boutiques of Yves Saint-Laurent in used Kaufhof-bags, which are available for that purpose. The first ones out of inconceivable shyness for their personnel, the others because of their own marxist consciousness and that of their public.

Because of its dualistic nature (external) impression management may become quite problematic, as was experienced lately by Fritz Raddatz, German expert of marxist literature:
Surrounded by valuable Gallé tables, expensive paintings by Wunderlich, Botero and Hundertwasser, and drinking out of ‘Fadengläsern’ (300 Mark apiece), the porche-driver, marxist and collectionneur wrote his recently published biography of Karl Marx. 

Now Mr. Raddatz seems to have a little trouble in explaining this ‘Jet-Set Unterbau’ in relation to his marxist ‘Überbau’! ‘My book would not be different if I were sitting without a Tiffany-lamp.’ Up to now however, his defence is not very convincing in the eyes of his audience (students, readers and reviewers). Anyhow his book is placed on view as ‘Written from the perspective of a lackey.’

5.3. Social distance

The performance of the Jet-Set fosters an impression that is idealized in several different ways. In this way the Jet-Set responds to the idealization of the higher strata which takes place in most societies. In addition to this impression management serves the purpose of mystification: ‘...the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact’.

‘It is a widely held notion that restrictions placed upon contact, the maintenance of social distance, provide a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience — a way... in which the audience can be held in a state of mystification in regard to the performer.’

Goffman also shows us the function of mystification for the performer (in our case: the Jet-Set):

Whatever their function for the audience, these inhibitions of the audience allow the performer some elbow room in building up an impression of his own choice and allow him to function, for his own good or the audience’s, as a protection of a threat that close inspection would destroy.

The audience senses secret mysteries and powers behind the performance, and the performer senses that his chief secrets are petty ones. As countless folk tales and initiation rites show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too.

The tragic thing about the Jet-Set’s position in a society characterized by a growing cultural levelling, is the very fact maintaining this social
distance and difference from the masses has become very hard to realize. Yet, maintaining social distance is essential for its social status. 'A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated.' Maintaining social distance in a levelling society therefore requires a performance of an extravagant and exuberant nature: It requires a **decadent** performance.

6. The decadent performance of the Jet-Set

Decadence is a process of de-institutionalization: existing institutions (traditional patterns of action and thinking) lose their stabilizing and authoritative influence on the conduct of people. A relevant example of such an institution is: 'acting economically', which means realizing an optimal ratio of costs and utility. This process produces a growing attention for externals like form and style, and a diminishing importance of the degree in which a certain product is adapted to its practical purpose.

Some manufacturers even respond to this decadent trend in our society by intentionally producing decadent products, like the electrical knife and the holder for toilet-paper with built-in transistor radio.

With respect to behaviour in general, decadence implies deviance from standards, values and norms (See Ch. 3 of our article). With respect to consumptive behaviour in particular, decadence means that goods are not being bought for their practical purpose, but mainly for their **social** purpose! The real problem is: How much social prestige is the possession of a certain item, or the exhibition of a certain pattern of behavior going to produce?

The production of hand-made goods is a 'conspicuous' form of production. Hand-made goods therefore are very useful for financial prestige purposes (See certain of our examples).

In our opinion decadence is a dominant cultural characteristic of contemporary western society. The difference in this respect between The Jet-Set and the other people is the fact that **the Jet-Set cultivates decadence**!

On this point there exists a resemblance between the decadence of the
Jet-Set and the Decadent Movement in French literature of the ‘fin de siècle’, when decadence was also cultivated. Koenraad W. Swart, in his imposing book: *The sense of decadence in nineteenth-century France*, even speaks of a ‘... satanic delight in decadence.’

As we have already said maintaining social distance in our society with its rolled down social stratification, requires more and more decadent patterns of behaviour and consumption, in order to gain social prestige. Veblen supposed that symbols advertising wealth and leisure would become more subtle in the future, just like the ‘advertising media’. ‘Wild’ clothes would become at variance with good taste. In our opinion we are living in a time in which we can establish the fact that the opposite has become true. The Jet-Set is ‘forced’ to exhibit very extravagant and decadent patterns of consumption and has to make use of ‘scandalous’ affairs spread by infamous ‘advertising media’. Good manners lost the importance they had in Veblen’s time. In our days it all has to be wild, shocking and decadent to be effective.

A groupsex party on the occasion of the first showing of a pornographic picture, featuring two of its stars and Mr. S., indeed is effective. (If the information to the audience is well-controlled). Just like suits made to measure of cashmere and vicuna fabrics (up to 3000 Mark per meter).

This is even more true as the Jet-Set has lost several attractive possibilities since the process of cultural levelling and developing prosperity. *Social distance has become very expensive. Nevertheless: the urge towards exclusiveness remains the law of the Jet-Set.* The Jet-Set still has some possibilities in our society to gain social prestige by cultivating decadence: a. Provocative patterns of behaviour aimed at infractions of traditional norms and values (See our examples); b. Effective use of communication media and publicity in general (The greediness with which the communication media respond to these kind of signals from the Jet-Set is a consequence of the same process of cultural levelling: information has to be ‘sensational’. In Holland we even have a special word indicating this phenomenon: ‘vertrossing’). c. The last possibility we want to mention is the one that characterizes the contemporary Jet-Set most. In search for snobbish exclusiveness, it is their only effort to realize intentionally a disproportion as large as possible between practical utility and costs, when consuming goods. We propose this formula as criterion for decadence.

400
Cartier, well-known jeweller, sells lighters from 420 Mark up to 20,000 Mark. 'Tank Louis Cartier' is the name of a golden wrist watch geniously modelled after the first armoured vehicle in the history of warfare (3160 Mark). In a German magazine this gadget was described as follows: 'It indicates date nor seconds, its figures are not luminous, it does not rewind automatically, it isn’t waterproof. Its fragile glass or its made to measure leather bracelet can only be replaced by Cartier. Its real function is related to that of the long nail Chinese bonzes were allowed to grow on their little finger as a symbol of noble idleness.  

In our society many people can spend money, few can afford to receive 'nothing' in return!

Maybe the reader wonders if there's a place for difference in case of the most popular commodity of our denimculture: jeans. Indeed there is. Again disproportion between utility and costs. Have a jeans-outfit made out of pre-bleached, used working-clothes, and pay 1800 Mark for it, like Mr. F.

Finally we would like to make a short remark in order to explain why the Jet-Set seems to have the youth as its reference group. There's no doubt that the Jet-Set, in its decadent patterns of behaviour and consumption, copies certain patterns of behavior from the youngsters. Especially with regard to clothes (jeans), music (not the fans but the Jet-Set was present at the party of the Rolling Stones concluding their latest European tour) and holiday resorts (e.g. Saint-Tropez). This can be seen as a form of anticipatory socialization. '...the acquisition of values and orientations found in statuses and groups in which one is not yet engaged...' By taking the younger generation as its reference group, the Jet-Set avoids to be compromised by having a 'higher' social stratum as its reference group. The youth is neutral, it cannot be identified with one specific social stratum. At the same time several youngsters manage to maintain a certain social distance from conventional patterns of behaviour, and from traditional norms and standards. Together this makes them a perfect reference group for the Jet-Set.

7. Conclusion

The Jet-Set is a social fact that has to be studied in relation with the
characteristics of the society in which it moves. That is why we prefered a cultural sociological perspective. In other publications we will return to this subject. By understanding a phenomenon like the Jet-Set, we come to understand a little more the nature of our own society: The Jet-Set is the crowning result of the status-system of a decadent culture that makes a fetish of consumption!

Notes

1. See for example: Der Spiegel, Nr. 7, 1975, p. 62.
2. See also the introduction by C. W. Mills in: Veblen, 1899.
5. Ibid., p. 42.
7. Ibid., Nr. 34, 1972.
13. Ibid., Am. ed., p. 44; Dutch ed., p. 56.
14. Ibid., Am. ed. p. 120.
15. Ibid., p. 121.
17. Ibid., Dutch ed., p. 172.
18. Peter Brügge in: Der Spiegel, Nr. 22, 1974, p. 129. I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Brügge for his permission to quote his article, which I found very stimulating for my subject.
20. L.c.
21. See also Mill's introduction to: Veblen, 1899, Am. ed., pp. XIV-XV.
23. See Ibid., p. 89; and his introduction to: Veblen, 1899, Am. ed., pp. XVI-XVII.
25. L.c.
29. L.c.
34. See Goffman, 1959, pp. 114 and 231.
Literature


