



**LUXURY BELIEFS. The new elitist means for distancing oneself from the the masses.**

Reading time 6 minutes

Some time ago, Rob Henderson came to my attention. Henderson is a doctoral student in psychology at Cambridge and studied psychology at Yale before that. He runs a very good blog on Substack. Most of it as premium content. A promising young scientist. Henderson has a very unusual CV and develops exciting ideas. Like the insight of Luxury Beliefs.

He was born into poverty and grew up in foster homes in California. At the age of 17, he enlisted in the military straight out of high school. He then attended Yale on the GI Bill. It was a very different environment for him. At Yale, there are more students from families in the top 1 per cent of the income scale than from the bottom 60 per cent of the population.

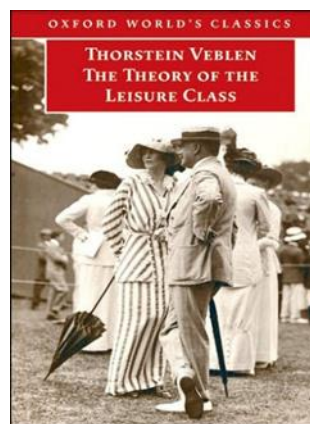
On his journey along the class ladder, he made a discovery and gave it a name:

Luxury Beliefs, i.e. luxury attitudes displace luxury goods in importance.

Luxury Beliefs are ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class while often imposing costs on the lower class. His [article](#) on these Luxury Beliefs has attracted a lot of attention. Below I summarise the article with pleasure.

In 1899, the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen published a book entitled The Theory of the Leisure Class.

Based on observations about social class in the late nineteenth century, Veblen's main idea is that we cannot assess the financial status of other people with certainty. But we can see when they can afford expensive goods and leisure activities.



In Veblen's time, people demonstrated their status with fine clothes like dinner jackets, top hats and evening gowns, or with time-consuming activities like golf. These goods and leisure activities could only be acquired or pursued by people who could spend their time and money learning something that had no practical use.

In short, Veblen was concerned with how economic capital is often transformed into cultural capital. A luxury nuisance, however, is that upper-class signals often trickle down to the rest of society, weakening the power of the signal. Once a signal is adopted by the masses, the wealthy abandon it.



In the USA, dueling was for a long time practised mainly by the elite. One of the main reasons why it went out of fashion in the early nineteenth century is mainly because this ritual of dueling was taken up by the lower class. The upper class then abandoned it. And then dueling was banned. By the upper class, of course.

The longing for recognition is the main motive. And to transform economic capital into cultural capital, it must be publicly visible. But the distinction does not only encompass clothes, goods or rituals. It now also extends to ideas, beliefs and causes.

For today, as material goods have become a noisy signal of social status and economic resources, the wealthy have decoupled social status from goods and linked it to beliefs.

What was once the stately top hats is now the American movement 'Defund the Police'. Supporters believe that there are too many police in America.

A survey found that Americans in the highest income category are by far the most common supporters of reducing police funding. They can afford to take this position because they already live in safe, often gated communities. And they can afford to hire private security.



7 Reasons to defund the police - youtube

But a vulnerable poor person in a crime-ridden neighbourhood cannot afford to support the removal of funding for the police. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, compared to Americans earning more than \$75,000 a year, the poorest Americans are seven times more likely to be victims of robbery, seven times more likely to suffer serious bodily injury and twenty times more likely to be victims of a sexual crime.

Holding a Luxury Belief is a manifestation of cultural capital, a sign of a person's fortunate economic circumstances. Luxury Beliefs are an honest sign of wealth because they are impossible, or at least very difficult, to fake.

There are also other mechanisms for luxury attitudes, such as downplaying the influence of the individual in shaping life circumstances.

A 2019 study found that people with higher incomes or higher social status were most likely to believe that success is due to luck and relationships rather than hard work.

However, numerous research findings indicate that an internal control mechanism compared to an external



control mechanism is associated with better academic, economic, health and relationship outcomes.

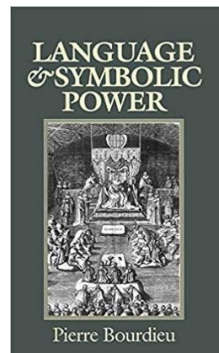
Here's the late Stanford psychology professor Albert Bandura: his research showed that belief in one's own ability to act, or what he called "self-efficacy", has strong positive effects on life success.

It is revealing to see what wealthy people tell their children. And it seems that wealthy people often spread the word that they owe their success to luck. But then they tell their own children how important hard work and individual effort are.

I found a very similar example in another article by Henderson: The elite like to show themselves to be particularly progressive. Among American college graduates, only 25 per cent think couples should be married before having children. And yet the vast majority of American university graduates who have children are married. In the American underclass, on the other hand, a great many children grow up outside of marriages, even outside of relationships.

Lastly, let's talk about strange vocabulary.

When Henderson was growing up in foster care, working as a dishwasher earning minimum wage or serving in the military, he never heard words like "cultural appropriation" or "gendered" or "heteronormative". Quick question for BrainCandy readers: Are you cisgender?



Language as cultural capital: Working class people cannot tell you what these terms mean. But if you go to an elite university, you will find many wealthy people who will be happy to explain them to you.

When people express unusual beliefs that contradict conventional opinion, such as downsizing the police or downplaying hard work, or when they use strange vocabulary, what they are really saying is often: "I was educated at a top university" or "I have the means and the time to acquire these esoteric ideas".

Only the wealthy can learn these things, because ordinary people have real problems to take care of.

The main purpose of Luxury Beliefs, then, is to give clues about the social class and education of the believer. Advocating the reduction of police resources or promoting the belief that we are not responsible for our actions are good ways of signalling membership of the elite.



Why are wealthy people more prone to luxury beliefs? They can afford it.

And they place the most value on their status. Luxury beliefs are the new status symbol. They are a clear indicator of social standing, wealth, education and the leisure time one has to adopt these fashionable beliefs.

In my view, however, it is definitely a mechanism that is also used by parts of the middle class for self-aggrandisement. One may have one's own opinion about gendering, but it is striking that gendering is most widespread among journalists. A group that likes to prove itself as belonging to the intellectual elite of society. It seems to me that the phenomenon is even more prevalent in the privileged public media in Germany.

Actions of the 'Last Generation', a radical environmentalist group, also seem to use these luxury beliefs mechanisms for themselves. One glues oneself to the street, demands the behavioural change of others, be it through foregoing certain pleasures or influencing political decisions. Objectively, one is quite passive, but one shows that one can devote the time to such actions. And you experience the anger of those who have been blocked in traffic as self-efficacy. The media reports are the icing on the cake. One elevates oneself to the status of the good guys. Wouldn't it be more effective for the future of society if one instead put this energy into a professional career in disciplines that, for example, develop the environmentally superior solutions for the massively increasing energy needs of the world's population? Or would that perhaps be too strenuous after all? Compared to working in an NGO?

I find arguments about cultural appropriation downright surreal. The appropriation and further development of ideas is one of the central drivers of social development. The marketing discipline has even perfected this mechanism. Let he who has not already 'copied' in marketing cast the first stone. Of course, pure copying is shabby. But trends and fashions can only emerge because ideas are taken up and spun on. By the suppliers in lustful lockstep with the buyers.

I think the Luxury Beliefs approach is an insight that will give us a lot of food for thought, understanding and self-reflection in the future. For marketing, it is worth considering carefully whether seemingly modern attitudes might not be understood by the masses as a signal of exclusion and should therefore be better avoided in brand communication to a broad target group.

Disclaimer: As a professional in understanding of human nature, I am sure that Henderson's thoughts are well suited to the general phenomena of the zeitgeist. The reverse is not true, of course, that every convinced genderist and every climate activist has self-exaltation from the masses as their central motivation. However, I classify fighters against cultural appropriation exclusively as self-aggrandising buzz killers.



## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour To [order](#)



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