

The Immorality of Conspicuous Consumption

By [Peter Singer](#)

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When Polish Prime Minister Radoslaw Sikorski went to Ukraine for talks last month, his Ukrainian counterparts reportedly laughed at him because he was wearing a Japanese quartz watch that cost only \$165.

A Ukrainian newspaper reported on the preferences of Ukrainian ministers, several of whom have watches that cost more than \$30,000. Even a Communist Party member of Ukraine's parliament, the Rada, was shown wearing a watch that retails for more than \$6,000.

The laughter should have gone in the opposite direction. Wouldn't you laugh — maybe in private, to avoid being impolite — at someone who pays more than 200 times as much as you do and ends up with a product that is far inferior?

That is what the Ukrainians have done. They could have bought an accurate, lightweight, maintenance-free quartz watch that can run for five years, keeping virtually perfect time,

without ever being moved or wound. Instead, they paid far more for clunkier watches that can lose minutes every month and that will stop if you forget to wind them for a day or two. (If they have an automatic mechanism, they will stop if you don't move them.)

In addition, the quartz watches also have an integrated alarm, stopwatch and timer functions that the other watches either lack, or that serve only as a design-spoiling, hard-to-read effort to keep up with the competition.

Why would any wise shopper accept such a bad bargain? Out of nostalgia, perhaps?

A full-page ad for Patek Philippe has Thierry Stern, the president of the company, saying that he listens to the chime of every watch with a minute repeater that his company makes, as his father and grandfather did before him. That's all very nice, but since the days of Stern's grandfather, we have made progress in time-keeping.

Why reject the improvements that human ingenuity has provided to us? I have an old fountain pen that belonged to my grandmother. It's a nice memento of her, but I wouldn't dream of using it to write this column.

U.S. economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen knew the answer. In his classic "The Theory of the Leisure Class," published in 1899, he argued that once the basis of social status became wealth itself — rather than, say, wisdom, knowledge, moral integrity or skill in battle — the rich needed to find ways of spending money that had no other objective than the display of wealth itself. He termed this "conspicuous consumption."

Veblen wrote as a social scientist, refraining from rendering moral judgments, though he left readers in little doubt about his attitude toward such expenditure in a time when many lived in poverty.

Wearing a ridiculously expensive watch to proclaim that one has achieved an elevated social standing seems especially immoral for a public official in a country where a significant portion of the population still lives in real poverty. These officials are wearing on their wrists the equivalent of four or five years of an average Ukrainian's salary. That tells Ukrainian taxpayers either that they are paying their public servants too much, or that their public servants have other ways of getting money to buy watches that they would not be able to afford otherwise.

The Chinese government knows what those "other ways" might be. As the International Herald Tribune reports, one aspect of the Chinese government's campaign against corruption is a clampdown on expensive gifts. As a result, according to Jon Cox, an analyst at Paris-based Kepler Capital Markets, "It's no longer acceptable to have a big chunky watch on your wrist." The Chinese market for expensive watches is in steep decline. Ukrainians, take note.

Wearing a watch that costs 200 times more than one that does a better job of keeping time says something else, even when it is worn by people who are not governing a relatively poor country. Legendary 19th-century U.S. industrialist Andrew Carnegie, the richest man of Veblen's era, was blunt in his moral judgments. "The man who dies rich," he is often quoted as saying, "dies disgraced."

We can adapt that judgment to the man or woman who wears a \$30,000 watch or buys similar luxury goods, like a \$12,000 handbag. Essentially, such a person is saying: "I am either extraordinarily ignorant or just plain selfish. If I were not ignorant, I would know that children are dying from diarrhea or malaria because they lack safe drinking water or mosquito nets, and obviously what I have spent on this watch or handbag would have been enough to help several of them survive. But I care so little about them that I would rather spend my money on something that I wear for ostentation alone."

Of course, we all have our little indulgences. I am not arguing that every luxury is wrong. But to mock someone for having a sensible watch at a modest price puts pressure on others to join the quest for ever-greater extravagance. That pressure should be turned in the opposite direction, and we should celebrate those, like Polish Prime Minister Sikorski, with modest tastes and higher priorities than conspicuous consumption.

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