

A Veblenian view of Russian folklore: Instrumental or ceremonial habits of thought?

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1st DRAFT, FOR DISCUSSION ONLY

Abstract

The Veblenian concept of different dispositions driving social behavior is applied in the discourse analysis of folkloric material. A sample of 935 proverbs and sayings represents the 19th century Russian popular discourse on housekeeping, work, consumption, spending, borrowing, lending, and debt. We compare the beliefs and messages carried by the folklore with the ideas of Thorstein Veblen. The core values of the past and the traditional habits of thought turn out to be much less ceremonial than conventional wisdom might imply. In Veblenian parlance, they are rather ‘productive’ and conducive to household welfare. Parsimony, providence and thrift, financial prudence and shrewd housekeeping, pragmatic learning and diligence at work, are socially approved and spurred. On the other hand, some behavior types currently associated with ‘progress’, welfare or ‘innovation’, were perceived as unproductive. Negative connotations are attached in the folklore to behavior such as overconsumption, indolence, greed, waste, ostentation, conspicuousness and inept dandyism, which often led to borrowing and debt. We conclude that the ceremonial character/nature of traditional institutions might be greatly exaggerated, whereas their instrumentality understated. It challenges the notion that tradition is mainly about ceremony, and that traditional values are hopelessly obsolete. Old habits such as self-reliance, self-restraint in finance and consumption, waste prevention, anti-consumerism and anti-acquisition, appear consistent with the sustainable development agenda. We also argue that Veblenian ethical ideas as well as his method remain relevant for socio-economic research.

Keywords: Thorstein Veblen; economic culture; traditional habits of thought; discourse analysis; financial prudence

JEL codes: A13, B52, B55, G51, Z13

1. Introduction

The title of this paper was inspired by a recent article in the *Journal of Economic Issues*, ‘The instrumentality of ceremonial habits of thought’ (Powell, 2023). Provided that ceremonial habits of thought possess a certain degree of instrumentality, one might query, who exactly and how determines whether a certain institution is instrumental or ceremonial, to begin with. This question is more pertinent yet when we study unfamiliar institutions of other societies and/or historic periods. The default setting has become to treat ‘old’ institutions as ceremonial and unproductive, given the fact that innovation destroyed or marginalized them, in the end. That may not always be the case.

Veblen used to differentiate between productive, or technological use of objects, and unproductive practices of a ceremonial character. The distinction between analytical categories subsequently evolved into the antinomy between instrumental values and ceremonial values (Bush, 1983). Starting from Clarence Ayres and his students, re-interpretations and distortions associated with Veblen’s ideas have taken root in institutionalist literature (Waller, 2022). Just to mention one, tradition became closely associated with ceremonial ways of thinking and doing. This point seemed to us out of line with the original institutionalist perspective and

motivated a closer look into the matter.

We depart from Thorstein Veblen's theorizing about dispositions, or proclivities, that drive social behavior and underlie institutions (Veblen, 1904; 1918; 1922; 1961; 2000), and apply this concept to popular discourse regarding personal economic conduct and work activities. We scan the encyclopedia of 19th century Russian proverbs (Dal, 1862) to identify beliefs and commandments related to housekeeping, consumption, spending, borrowing, lending, and labor. Veblen's dichotomic concept is regarded by his followers as essential for institutional analysis (Bush, 1987; Elsner, 2012; Powell, 2023). That said, empirical applications of this concept have been few, and apart (Waller, 2022). Actual interpretation of the Veblenian dichotomy is oversimplistic, or contrary to the Veblenian spirit.

We, thus, undertake a two-fold effort. *Firstly*, we research the contextual meaning of the Veblenian categories of ceremony and instrumentality in order to refine the ontology and the methodology. *Secondly*, we perform a case study projecting Veblen's concept to specific empirical material, to see whether the concept yields meaningful results. More specifically, we search possible consistencies between Veblen's discourse on four dispositions (parental bent, workmanship, proclivity to gain useful knowledge, and self-regard), on one hand, and the beliefs and commandments widely accepted by Russian people in the 19th century regarding personal finance, economic conduct and working activities, on the other. Our hypothesis is that the common notion about traditional core values and folk discourse might be inaccurate. Veblen himself would have, probably, recognized many of them as instrumental. The reason for labelling them as merely ceremonial is likely to be ideologically motivated.

This paper adds to our research of the interplay between consumerist culture and household debt from an institutionalist perspective (Vernikov and Kurysheva, 2023a; 2023b). Here, we focus on 'old' traditional institutions whose subsequent evolution (and decay) opened the way to social acceptance of financialization by the Russian populace after 1991.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section offers a brief overview of Veblen's theorizing about the drivers of human behavior. Section 3 covers previous interpretations and application of the Veblenian dichotomy. Section 4 describes our attempt at its empirical application in the discourse analysis of old Russian folklore. Section 5 discusses findings and spells out implications. Section 6 concludes.

2. Veblen's theorizing on the drivers of economic conduct

In his analysis of institutional evolution, Veblen discards studying human conduct apart from social psychology and cultural context (Gruchy, 1947, pp.58–62; Jennings, Waller, 1994, p.1004). His book *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of Industrial Arts* (Veblen, 1918) outlines the interrelatedness between the prime movers in human behavior — he coins those by 'time-worn' term *instinct*, and the material welfare of the community and cultural growth (pp.1–3, 25). Along with the term *instinct*, Veblen utilizes words such as

instinctive proclivity / disposition, (Veblen, 1918, p.1); *innate and persistent propensity of human nature* (p.2), *native bias* (p.39), *hereditary trait* (p.13); *bent* (p.11); *impulse* (pp.155, 172); *sentiment* (p.31); *sense* (p.27). Together with the material environment, these innate proclivities condition the system (scheme) of institutions, including accustomed ways, or habits of doing, working and thinking in the community. We illustrate Veblen's logic graphically in **Figure 1**.

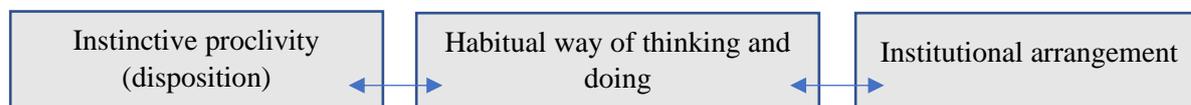


Figure 1. Interrelatedness between instinctive proclivity, behavioral principle, social practice and institutions
 Source: Authors based on (Veblen, 1904; 1918; 1922; 2000; Gruchy, 1947)

Viewing Veblen's approach as analytical rather than methodological became commonplace (Waller, 2022). We found a clarification concerning epistemological and methodological aspects in the notion of instinct. Reacting to opponents' objections to the use of 'instinct', Veblen restricts the meaning of this term, for the purposes of his own analysis, as 'the conscious pursuit of an objective end which the instinct in question makes worth while' (Veblen, 1918, p.5). As Allan Gruchy notes,

"In explaining the nature of instincts Veblen adopts an operational definition. An instinct is not to be defined in terms of a concrete something of a physical nature which may be uncovered by laboratory experimentation, but rather in terms of those fixed behavior patterns which reveal how people function or operate... It must rather be defined in terms of what the individual does or how he behaves as a matter of ingrained habit." (Gruchy, 1947, pp.61–62).

Whereas Veblen's instinct is 'a fixed inheritable tendency toward a special mode of behavior' (Gruchy, 1947, p.62), each instinct has a specific 'objective end of endeavour' (Veblen, 1918, p.3), so that 'the ends of life, then, the purposes to be achieved, are assigned by man's instinctive proclivities' (p.5). An instinct is likely found in observed 'fixed behavior patterns which reveal how people function or operate' (Gruchy, 1947, p.61), not in underlying 'anatomical or physiological aptitudes' (Veblen, 1918, p.4). It is unlikely to be discovered through a laboratory experiment like separable discrete irreducible psychological elements. This approach, in our view, justifies the application of qualitative methods inherently linked to behavioral observations.

Veblen focuses on four dispositions: *parental bent*, *the sense of workmanship* (also called *the proclivity to construction*¹), *self-regarding impulse*, and *the instinct of idle curiosity*. The first two 'make directly for the material welfare of the community' (Veblen, 1918, p.25). Parental bent is substantially unselfish *provision for posterity*, somewhat anti-egoistic and anti-wasteful conduct preventing overconsumption and predatory or warlike resource exploit in order not to make life harder for the filial generation (pp.26–27). Closely tied with

¹ Veblen once uses the expression *proclivity to construction* as synonymous to the instinct of workmanship (Veblen, 1918, p.11). Allan Gruchy attributes the origin of this wording to William James (Gruchy, 1947, p.64, ft.54).

the parental bent is “efficient use of the means at hand and adequate management of the resources available for the purposes of life” (p.31), which is the essentially the sense of workmanship, *craftsman working, proficiency and technological mastery* (pp.64, 34–35). Elsewhere, the instinct of workmanship is treated as ‘*the propensity for achievement and the repugnance to futility*’ (Veblen, 1922, p.33). Idle curiosity, when restricted to an endeavor for the knowledge and learning of a ‘pragmatic’ character (Veblen, 1961, pp.5–9), promotes advancement in technological knowledge and proficiency that the instinct of workmanship rests upon.

Self-regarding proclivity, generally speaking, gives rise to ‘predatory habits of thought’ (Veblen, 1918, p.202; Almeida, 2023), resulting in ‘predatory or warlike exploit’ (Veblen, 1918, p.45) of resources and opportunities. Related behavioral principles are self-seeking, ‘self-complacency and self-abasement’ (p.47), which manifest themselves in wasteful and useless living, invidious comparison, pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption, strive for acquisition and indolence.

Different proclivities intersect. “Animus for economy and efficiency”, in Veblenian parlance, is both “is a simple expression of the parental disposition itself” and “an essential function of the instinct of workmanship” (Veblen, 1918, p.27).

3. Interpretations and application

Veblen’s dichotomous categories, as pointed out by his successors, include, for instance, pecuniary institutions and industrial institutions; acquisition and production; pecuniary employment and industrial employment; invidious emulation and technological efficiency; competitive advertising and valuable information; ceremonial and technological (Waller, 2022, p.23). Intrinsically, every such dichotomy rests on the contrast between productive (technological) and unproductive (ceremonial).

Although Ayres had explicitly disassociated himself from direct following to Veblen when drawing ‘the distinction of the technological from the institutional aspects of human behavior and culture’ (Ayres, 1935, pp.36–37), the expression ‘Veblen – Ayres dichotomy’ got locked-in². However, in the elaborations by Ayres, his students, and Paul Bush, Veblen’s theorizing is interpreted selectively and inconsistently. There is confusion around the precise meaning of institution and technology, ceremonial and technological (Hodgson, 2004; Waller, 2021; 2022). Institutions appear restricted to past experience, irrelevant for current social problems, and obstructive for ‘progressive technology’ (Ayres, 1935; 2021; Waller, 2022). Under the influence of those writings, cultural legacy became closely associated with ceremonial values (Bush, 1987, p.1079).

Not everyone would agree with such interpretations. Proverbial wisdom and moral maxims are a part of the

² Some authors used to apply the expression “Dewey-Veblen-Ayres dichotomy” (Samuels, 1990, p.1162). Deweyan term ‘instrumental’ was precisely what Veblen meant by ‘technological’.

‘primary knowledge about the institutional order’, and reflect schemes which are ‘highly pragmatic, directly related to concrete actions’ (Berger and Luckman, 1991, pp.82–84, 112). People start not as isolated and separate individuals but in the ‘environment of socially sanctioned habits’ (Gruchy, 1947, p.161; Commons, 1959, p.45). Social reality, essentially historical, is in fact a reality of wisdom, beliefs, habits, myths which underlie institutions (Berger and Luckman, 1991, pp.72, 83). The preservation and expansion of an institutional order depends on developing ‘a canopy of legitimations’ to protect it, involving cognitive and normative interpretations. For institutional order reproduced throughout communities, ‘the same story, so to speak, must be told to all the children’ (p.79). Custom is the social habit which creates an individual habit (Commons, 1959, p.45). Following shared values, norms, standards and symbols, including pecuniary standard of living is a way of socializing (Veblen, 2000; 1922; Baudrillard, 1998).

It is commonplace to assume ‘an enormous critical literature’ on the dichotomy in the *Journal of Economic Issues* (Latsis, 2010, p.605, ft.1). Furthermore, ‘the dynamics of social institutions between an ‘instrumental’ and a ‘ceremonial’ value base’ is regarded as ‘a most relevant issue for empirical socioeconomic research’ (Elsner, 2012, p.1).

We do find many very detailed papers of a theoretical and methodological nature, but a surprising lack of empirical ones. By empirical, we mean that the dichotomy, or more broadly the Veblenian view on value and conduct, is employed as an analytic tool to study something specific, be it an institution or a community. An interdisciplinary research using Veblen’s cumulative causation methodology is applied to the case of social evolution in Turkey in terms of instinctive dispositions (Ogurla, 2016). This study is conducted in an anthropological and sociologist approach, which could be much more authentic to OIE tradition, than the hypothesis testing of quantitative nature.

Since Bush articulated the problem of ‘ceremonial encapsulation’ more clearly, the tendency to equate ‘institution’ and ‘social’, as well as ‘technology’ and ‘tool’, apparently reduced (Waller, 1987, p.326). Applied studies of technical innovation suggest that in reality there is no strict social/technology dichotomy (Bijker et al., 1993; see also Latsis, 2010). Still, currently there is inconsistency around the antithesis between social, or institutional, and technological, which is the central point of ‘Veblen–Ayres dichotomy’.

Reflecting the ambiguity in theoretical papers, empirical ones offer a variety of interpretations of the key concepts used to discuss empirical evidence. Just for instance, with a reference to what the authors call ‘Veblen – Ayres tradition’, a paper on institutional history of Don Army Region in the South of Russia describes the traditional ways of Cossacks' economic life in the 19th century as archaic, predominated by ceremonial values and mythologized thinking. Traditional institutions supposedly hindered economic modernization due to insusceptibility to institutional and technological innovation (Maslov and Volchek, 2014). One might guess whether this approach is not a tribute to the Ayresian tradition rather than Veblenian one.

In another yet paper on Russia, the Veblenian dichotomy is employed to study the labor market (Volchik et al., 2023). Reindustrialization is found to overcome the asynchrony of technological and institutional changes, i.e., contradiction between instrumental and ceremonial values, apparently opposed to each other in line with precisely the Ayresian, rather than Veblenian, tradition.

In an earlier study, we found, somewhat counter-intuitively, that old Russian proverbs describe debts and consumerism in a manner quite consistent with Veblen's perception and sarcasm towards the conspicuous culture in Western societies (Vernikov and Kurysheva, 2023).

In a similar vein, positive role in early industrial development of Russia is attributed to 'asceticism, diligence, and enterprise' of Old Believers (as well as to 'Pomor and Cossack pathfinders') (Treivish, 2023, pp.17–18). It reconfirms that the relationship between tradition, including religious, and technological innovation is much more complex than implied by Ayres' theoretical simplification .

The striking scarcity of empirical papers suggested the existence of a research gap. Along with John Latsis, we argue that the evidence to cope with misinterpretations of Veblen's ideas in empirical study 'is readily available in Veblen's own writings' (2010, pp.606–607). We, thus, strive to use the Veblenian dichotomy as a tool to examine the habits of thought in the Russian 19th century folklore.

4. Russian folklore through the lens of Veblenian dichotomy

3.1 Objective, focus, and material

First and foremost, we refrain from presuming that traditional practices and the related core values and principles of conduct are archaic or 'ceremonial'. Instead, we suggest a technique (a methodological application) to find out whether they can be categorized as productive or ceremonial ones, according to Veblen's criteria.

With this in mind, we look at the Russian folk discourse on a selected range of matters through the lens of original Veblen's conception. We compare the thrust of the commonly held principles reflected in popular proverbs and sayings, on one hand, and Veblenian four proclivities that drive human conduct (parental bent, workmanship, proclivity to gain useful knowledge, and self-regard), on the other. The hypothesis is that the widespread perception of folk discourse as ceremonial (and therefore unproductive) might be inaccurate. In a way, we turn to an expression, 'the instrumentality of ceremonial habits of thought' (Powell, 2023). Even more than that, we suppose, popular commandments might turn out to be instrumental rather than ceremonial ones, from a somewhat different perspective.

Folk discourse embodies the elements of Russian economic culture of the respective period. Our main source is the book by Vladimir Ivanovich Dal (1862) who collected and classified popular proverbs and sayings in the mid-19th century. The focus is on the assessment of particular situations, i.e., the moral and ethical

messages contained in the proverbs.

Surely, we do not discard that ‘both ceremonial and instrumental considerations are intertwined in all consumption decisions’ (Hamilton and Tilman, 1983, p.795), just like an article of consumption ‘may be useful and wasteful both, and its utility to the consumer may be made up of use and waste in the most varying proportions. Consumable goods, and even productive goods, generally show the two elements in combination, as constituents of their utility’ (Veblen, 1922, p.100). Gaps between proverbs and the day-to-day conduct of the Russian populace remain a subject for a future study.

In order to remain within the field of Institutional Economics, we look at popular beliefs and commandments regarding personal finance, housekeeping, consumption, spending, borrowing, and lending. The 935 proverbs and sayings in our sample originate from the following sections of Dal’s collection (1862): A Lot vs. A Little; Account; Borrowings; Care and Experience; Craft and Workmen; Dandyism; Envy and Greed; Food; Generosity vs. Parsimony; Hospitality; Housekeeping; Humility vs. Pride; Neighbor and Frontier; Own vs. Alien; Praise and Boast; Sorrow and Resentment; Stock; Temperance vs. Greed; Temptation; Thrift vs. Squander; Time, measure, and haste; Wealth vs. Squalor; Work vs. Indolence. **Figure 2** illustrates the sampling process.

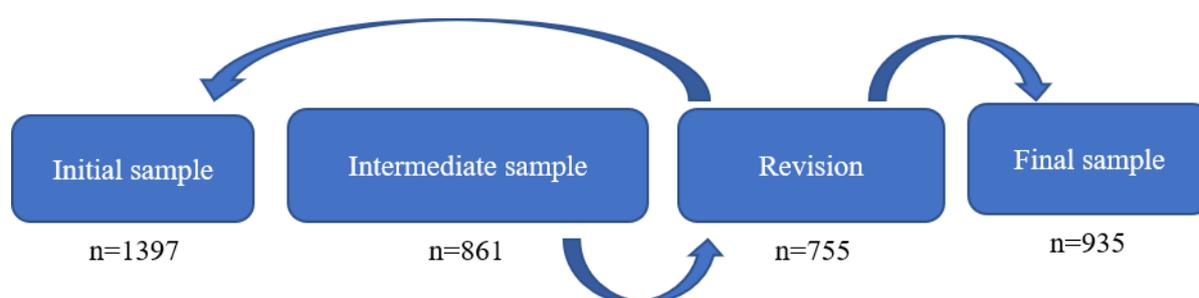


Figure 2. Sampling process

Source: Authors

We accept a whole proverb or saying, rather than selected elements thereof (words or phrases), as a unit of analysis. It allows going deeper than the literal meaning and grasping the essence of the message, despite an allegorical shape. Nearly 76% of proverbs ascertain something by summarizing observations of daily living and the commonness of a particular social practice, while the remaining 24% are prescriptive. These latter usually contain an imperative verb (‘care’, ‘give’, ‘leave’, ‘let’, ‘protect’, ‘save’, etc.).

3.3 Method

In order to analyze the proverbs in our sample through the lens of Veblen’s concept, we operationalized four Veblenian ‘proclivities’ (parental, workmanship, self-regarding, and curiosity) with the help of his own terms and expressions explaining their content and essential functions. Productive behavioral settings, or principles, and unproductive ones were grouped according to their connection to relevant proclivities. Similar wordings are integrated into 15 notional (semantical) categories (**Table 1**).

Table 1

Operationalizing key concepts: Instinctive dispositions and their essential traits in Veblen's discourse

Disposition*	Feature of conduct*	Category for the grouping of Russian proverbs
1	2	3
<i>Productive features, that conduce directly to the material well-being and cultural growth</i>		
Parental bent	<i>community's future welfare;</i> <i>present wealth is desired mainly for its prospective advantage;</i> <i>future goods are preferred to present goods</i>	animus for economy and efficiency, parsimony, thrift
	<i>provision for posterity;</i> <i>practical working of the parental solicitude;</i> <i>tutelage of the incoming generation;</i> <i>filial generation is given the preference over the parental generation in all that touches their material welfare;</i> <i>kindly and unselfish tendance</i>	
	<i>parental solicitude in mankind</i>	unselfish provision for posterity
	<i>providence;</i> <i>parsimony;</i> <i>thrift;</i> <i>hoarding;</i> <i>economy and efficiency for the common good</i>	
Idle curiosity	<i>'pragmatic' knowledge;</i> <i>knowledge of a 'pragmatic' character;</i> <i>learning of a 'pragmatic' character;</i> <i>technological knowledge</i>	pragmatic learning, technological knowledge
Workmanship, proclivity to construction	<i>diligence;</i> <i>productive effort;</i> <i>proclivity for taking pains;</i> <i>gain a livelihood by honest work through his own individual skill and enterprise</i>	diligence, proclivity for taking pains
	<i>proficiency and technological mastery;</i> <i>craftsman working;</i>	craftsman working, proficiency and technological mastery
	<i>efficient use of the means at hand;</i> <i>propensity unselfishly and impersonally to make the most of the material means at hand;</i> <i>technological use; serviceability</i>	serviceability, technological use of objects
	<i>non-invidious interest</i>	shrewd housekeeping
	<i>adequate management of the resources available for the purposes of life;</i> <i>prudence, equanimity;</i> <i>shrewd management;</i>	

Unproductive features, that inhibit well-being

Self-regard	<i>resource waste;</i> <i>wasting heritage of resources and opportunity;</i> <i>wastefulness;</i> <i>wasteful and useless living;</i> <i>to make the way of life harder for the next generation through neglect of due provision for their subsistence</i>	improvidence, preceding consumption, living beyond means, debt captivity
	<i>indolence;</i> <i>irksomeness of labour</i>	indolence, irksomeness of labor
	<i>acquisition;</i> <i>aptitudes for acquisition;</i>	acquisition
	<i>self-seeking;</i> <i>naive pursuit of material efficiency;</i> <i>unearned gain</i>	self-seeking, unearned gain
	<i>self-complacency;</i> <i>self-abasement;</i> <i>self-aggrandisement;</i> <i>arrogance</i>	self-aggrandizement, self-complacency, arrogance
	<i>predatory or warlike exploit;</i> <i>native predatory animus;</i> <i>tact, effrontery and prevarication</i>	predatory or hostile exploit
	<i>pecuniary emulation;</i> <i>invidious comparison;</i> <i>envy, jealousy, и их производные;</i> <i>improvident greed</i>	invidious comparison and greed
	<i>ostentation;</i> <i>boast;</i> <i>conspicuous consumption;</i> <i>conspicuous waste;</i> <i>conspicuous wastefulness; conspicuously wasteful manner;</i> <i>living hand-to-mouth in order to keep up a decent appearance;</i> <i>conspicuously wasteful and tasteless show</i>	conspicuousness, ostentation, ‘living hand-to-mouth in order to keep up a decent appearance’

* according to Veblen (1904; 1918; 1922; 1961; 2000)

Source: Authors

We used Veblen’s phrases (column 2) as *in vivo* codes to find correspondence between the items included in our sample and notional categories (column 3). Then we matched the identified categories with related proclivities (column 1). We acted abductively, combining both inductive and deductive reasoning, to minimize bias and misinterpretation. Each proverb was matched with a single category only. The breakdown of sample of Russian proverbs by ‘proclivity’ is as follows:

Self-regard	468	(50.1%)
Workmanship	291	(31.1%)
Parental bent	135	(14.4%)
Idle curiosity; pragmatic knowledge	41	(4.4%)
Summary	935	(100%)

3.4 Results

We present below our matching of Russian proverbs with Veblen's expressions. We offer a literal translation of the proverb from Russian, followed, where available, by its English equivalent (in square brackets).

Disposition: Parental bent (n=135³)

Animus for economy and efficiency, parsimony, thrift

- Parsimony is half the salvation. Thrift is a help better than profits. Thrifty means avoiding debt. (Better spared, then ill spent).
- The thrifty is better than the rich. Thrifty is never in need. (A penny saved is a penny earned. Provision in season, makes a rich house).
- The Cossack lives not by the present, but by the future.
- A good Cossack does not disdain to eat what is at hand.

Unselfish provision for posterity

- Debt is the first inheritor. Debt does not wait for a will. (Out of debt, out of danger).
- Keep money both for son's living and for own funeral.

Disposition: Idle curiosity (n=41)

Pragmatic learning, technological knowledge

- The craft is not a heavy burden to carry but brings weal / entails well-being.
- The craft doesn't ask for bread but provides bread itself. (Money spent on the brain is never spent in vain).

Disposition: Workmanship (n=291)

Diligence, proclivity for taking pains

- Prosperity comes with diligence, while the lazy men's house is empty.
- Without effort, you won't even pull a fish out of a pond. (No pain, no gain).
- Don land doesn't feed parasites.

Craftsman working, proficiency and technological mastery

- Craftsmanship is respected everywhere. Workmanship is in high esteem everywhere.
- Once a tailor is handy, any dress fits well. The better the cutter's skill, the more appropriate a dress fit. (Practice makes perfect).

Serviceability, technological use of objects

- Soap is gray but it makes the things white.
- Wrong taste yet eaten enough / well fed.
- Intact thing is a proper / useful / convenient one.

Shrewd housekeeping

- Money for an ordinary day, money for a holiday, and money for a rainy day. (Keep money for a rainy day).
- It is not the outfit but the housekeeping that makes the wife handsome / pleasant. (A place for everything and everything in its place).

³ The figure in parentheses refers to the number of proverbs on each respective topic.

Disposition: Self-regard (n=468)

Improvvidence, preceding consumption, living beyond means, debt captivity

- If one lives beyond means, sorrow comes.
- Better stay bare than fall in debt. (Better to go to bed supperless than to rise in debt).
- – What's your source of living? – Borrowed monies are. – And what do you eat? – Soup and pies.
- Where the young leaves a tear, the old man faces a hole.

Invidious comparison and greed

- Restful sleep goes away where the neighbor lives well.
- What your envy is, there your efforts go.

Indolence, irksomeness of labor

- Idleness won't make a Cossack merry. (An idle brain is the devil's workshop).

Self-aggrandizement, self-complacency, arrogance

- Whenever rich, I will get horns: Whoever I want, I will gore. (Pride will have a fall).

Conspicuousness, ostentation, "living hand-to-mouth in order to keep up a decent appearance"

- The apparel is silk, though the belly is empty.
- A foolish guy flaunts money. (A fool and his money are soon parted).
- Out of pocket, while the caftan is smart (dandy).
- Shiny boots, empty pot.

Acquisition

- A miser collects money to buy the devil.

Self-seeking, unearned gain

- Don Cossack upholds honor, even in the face of death. (A good name is the best of all treasures).
- Bare-hand usurers count red-hot coins in the hell.
- Unrighteous gains make no sound wealth.

Predatory or hostile exploit

- Whatever he gets in his claws will be lost.

We were particularly interested in proverbs which seem to be out of line with Veblen's ethics ($n = 36$, or nearly 4% of the sample). These proverbs, supposedly, justify unvirtuous or unworthy behavior, portray it in a favorable light, or deny its consequences. One might get the impression that some proverbs encourage laziness and indolence, underestimate hard diligent work, condone personal irresponsibility, excessive consumption or unnecessary spending:

- Eat more, live longer.
- It is impossible to accomplish everything.
- Let the last item pledged, but have the Pancake Day well celebrated.
- Once left for tomorrow, the work won't disappear.
- Our work is hard to complete.
- Peasant labor won't give prosperity, but a hump instead.
- Russian man rests on three pillars: 'at random', 'at haphazard', and 'somehow'.
- God shall forgive who sleeps long hours.

The existence and ubiquity of a certain (unfair and pernicious) practice is, indeed, acknowledged in such proverbs. However, their semantics and connotations show repugnance to, and condemnation of, related beliefs, often via sarcastic or ironic wording. The unproductivity of widespread indolence, conspicuousness, ostentation, deception, wastefulness, lack of neatness and careful accounting are bitterly admitted but do not constitute a matter of pride. Likewise, the presence of hope did not devalue diligence in the perception of Russian people and did not cancel the need for labor efforts:

- A city won't be erected at random; a child won't be born at a guess.
- Don't demand for a harvest, but plow the field and pray to God.
- Pray to God, while keeping diligence at work. (God helps those who help themselves).

Thus, discrepancies between Veblenian ethics and Russian folk discourse might be illusory.

5 Discussion and implications

We find that the assessments of economic conduct in old Russian folk discourse resonate with Veblen's ethical standpoint. Traditional discourse endorses conduct associated with expedient purposeful economic activities. It contains "didactic exhortations" (Veblen, 1961, p.9) to parsimony, providence and thrift, financial prudence and shrewd housekeeping, pragmatic learning and diligence at work. The thrust of the proverbs is waste prevention, anti-consumerism and anti-acquisition. These features of conduct fall, according to Veblen's classification, into the category of *productive* ones, and correspond with the parental bent, the instinct of workmanship and idle curiosity, in its pragmatic aspect.

In contrast, wasteful and useless living, invidious comparison, self-seeking, acquisition, improvidence and greed, indolence, self-aggrandizement and arrogance, self-seeking, ostentation and conspicuous motive in consumption, resulting from self-regarding impulse, are disapproved and sneered. Veblen would have regarded all this as *unproductive*.

Our narrow objective was to trace people's perception of living beyond means, precedence of consumption, and debt bond. We failed to find Veblen's explicit assessment of private debt. He noted, however, that "no class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption" (Veblen, 1922, p.85). We take it is a blatant reference to pecuniary emulation when a person lives *hand-to-mouth in order to keep up a decent appearance* (p.87), despite the scarcity of means. Personal debt, which has strongly negative connotations in Russian proverbs, can be seen at the intersection of three dispositions: 1) unwillingness to push debts to one's sons and the desire to avoid debt captivity correspond with the unselfish provision for posterity (*parental bent*); 2) avoiding personal debt correlates with moderate consumption, efficient use of the means at hand, and rational housekeeping (*the instinct of workmanship*); 3) finally, lavish spending, which might require borrowings, is triggered by *self-regarding sentiments*. Being incompatible with

serenity, benefit and dignity, debt was deemed as a moral burden, a trap, captivity and bondage. Lending and usury appeared socially reviled practices as well.

Significant prevalence of proverbs whose meaning is consistent with Veblen's assessment, indicates that productive mode of conduct was deeply rooted at that time. Proverbs reflect a comprehension of the interplay between diligence at work, serviceable use of objects, productive efforts, and self-restraint in consumption, regardless of current financial status. These principles are seen as the basis of future prosperity.

Our empirical work with Russian folklore suggests one point of epistemological character. What might seem at a first glance ceremonial or unproductive, can be seen differently after a careful study of the entire institutional arrangement and context. This can be accomplished via qualitative methods such as historical analysis, interviews and informal conversations, action research, participant observation, or field studies (similar to those undertaken by Elinor Ostrom).

Contemporary world faces the problems which Veblen warned about. Widely spread, pecuniary institutions and consumerist culture gave unprecedented growth to hostile exploit of resources, overconsumption, hedonism, financial occupations (employment), predatory competitive advertising, and aggressive salesmanship. Even parenthood morphed into a hindrance to endless satisfaction of individual needs and wants. Meanwhile, as per Veblen's *The Instinct of Workmanship* (1918), parental bent is essentially an anti-acquisitiveness, anti-selfishness, and anti-hedonism.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, folk discourse demonstrates people's apprehension of complex phenomena that recently turned into sociological and anthropological concerns; they are the precedence of consumption and the symbolic value of objects (Baudrillard, 1996), relative social positioning (Frank, 2007) and positional goods (Hirsch, 2013), inseparability between moral and material aspects of debt (Peebles, 2010), as well as devastating consequences of resource waste. It is also evident that traditional Russian views on financial prudence and living within one's means are consistent with the sustainable development agenda of nowadays.

Despite somewhat archaic verbal (linguistic) form, proverbs and sayings turn out to be of enduring relevance. This inference seems crucial for non-Western cultures which course of development pertains to preserving and maintaining their authenticity.

6 Conclusion

Our paper studies Russian folklore through the lens of the ideas developed by Thorstein Veblen. In view of the existing misinterpretations of Veblenian ideas, we consult his original writings. This way we obtain a more detailed understanding of the features of human conduct attributed to four dispositions (parental bent, workmanship, proclivity to gain useful knowledge, and self-regard). We then scan a sample of 935 old Russian proverbs to identify beliefs on personal finance, housekeeping, consumption, spending, borrowing, and

lending. We find a substantial affinity between the two.

Empirical evidence suggests that, up to the 20th century, popular discourse differentiated unambiguously between what Veblen regarded as ‘productive’ behavior and ‘unproductive’, or ceremonial, one. Old Russian proverbs and sayings tended to approve parsimony, providence and thrift, financial prudence and shrewd housekeeping, pragmatic learning and diligence at work. These features of conduct are attributed by Veblen to parental bent, workmanship and aspiration to useful knowledge, conducing to household welfare. In other words, the principles of financial self-reliance and self-restraint in consumption and spending, which resonate with the productive mode of behavior, were socially approved and spurred. Conversely, ceremonial patterns such as overconsumption, greed, waste, indolence, ostentation, conspicuousness and dandyism despite the scarcity of means, together with their immediate effects such as borrowing and personal debt, as well as lending and usury, are disapproved and condemned. The share of proverbs which sneer or warn against unreasonable unproductive patterns, by far exceeds those justifying and encouraging them (96% vs. 4%).

The research implication of this paper is that we suggest how Veblenian original concept can be utilized in a case study. Discursive and interpretative analysis of folklore is carried out, and its outcome is compared with Veblen’s theorizing. Refraining from *a priori* notion about traditional institutions as merely ceremonial, we discover, with some degree of surprise, that the commandments of the 19th century Russian folklore about human economic behavior were productive, to use Veblen’s jargon. Ceremonial considerations are, in reality, inseparable from instrumental ones in every single decision. In case of proverbs, the situation is slightly different: they reflect, as a rule, principles and features of conduct that are socially acceptable and desirable to sustain and develop within a particular community, so it is absolutely natural to find a degree of instrumentality in a traditional way of thinking. Furthermore, what has been commonly perceived as ceremonial may emerge as instrumental (like in the case at hand), and *vice versa*. The designation of ceremonial and instrumental should not be taken for granted, therefore, especially when dealing with non-Western cultures, and remote ones. We hope that our finding makes a tiny contribution to Institutionalist literature.

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