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Part 2 of Two Parts

Is Life Just a Search for Status? Part 2: On Watch in Biarritz and St Tropez

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Glance down. Are you wearing a watch? Can you recall what you paid for it? Hold that figure in your mind.

This is the second half of a two-part article on the economic and social implications of status. I have been doing some field work. Last week it was St Tropez on the Mediterranean. Then I travelled west. I am now in Biarritz, on the Atlantic coast, just north of the border with Spain. Very warm and sunny – tough work but all in the interests of research on the role of rank and status in society.

Over the screen of my laptop, a beautiful swimming pool is visible (even larger than last month). Today I write in the Sofitel Hotel Biarritz, which, although the daily rate makes you wince, overlooks one of the nicest beaches in Europe. A stroll outside the hotel reveals that a concern for status makes human beings do peculiar things.

First, shops in Biarritz sell things that nobody needs. Perhaps it is because I am a man, but the shop window with diamond-studded G-strings sticks in my mind. They were not priced and for one reason or another I did not see them modelled. Less exotically, I went into a tie shop. These were striking – Leonard designer ties. But at 120 pounds, most of us might wonder whether one needs a purple fish floating over one's heart against an embroidered silk background of green seaweed and yellow seahorses.

Other examples were in the watch shops. On the face of it a wristwatch is dullsville -- a necessity -- so in principle a shop selling watches should be a utilitarian place, like a supermarket selling potatoes. A decent watch can, after all, be bought for 10 pounds. It

will keep perfect time. Why then are large numbers of watches sold in Biarritz at 1,000 pounds, 10,000 pounds, and for all I know 100,000 pounds? The answer must be that those who purchase such watches want status.

Second, the beach promenade in Biarritz is a particularly nice one. Waves crash noisily; surfers paddle. The promenade is filled with people. Among them, weaving in and out, run joggers – many many of them. Yet there is a curious thing about the joggers of Biarritz. They are all thin and immaculate. I don't know what your experience of life is, but my observation of joggers is that plenty of them are scruffy and fairly large. The natural conclusion is that people run in Biarritz not to keep fit and lose weight, but rather to be seen.

These examples suggest that to understand people's decisions we need to look at the social environment. Who will see me and my purchase?

Further evidence comes from St Tropez. The seafront there is fun and also educational about human beings. We are talking here about an L-shaped stretch of quay that is about 150 metres long. This tiny piece of real estate is full of yachts -- parked stern on to the port. Owners pay a vast daily fee for a mooring. Now, when I say yachts, that may be misleading.

Imagine an immaculate white hotel, squeezed and shortened, with "New Life: British Virgin Islands" painted on it in gold lettering. That is what I mean by a yacht. At the back of these floating monuments to the consumer society usually sit their owners, often also in white and gold, interestingly. They watch the stream of pedestrians. The pedestrians watch them.

Biarritz and St Tropez are extreme. Concern for social rank does not come much starker. Yet my belief is that they tell us plenty about Birmingham and St Albans.

Think of your life. If your company car were actually a second-hand cheaper model, wouldn't it run just as efficiently? If your make-up or tie had cost half the amount, wouldn't your appearance be virtually as attractive? If you wore a cheap watch, wouldn't you still make it to

appointments? But we cannot take this economical route in life, because we feel others would look down on us. We might even miss promotion. Status matters.

Unfortunately, in a society, there is only so much rank to go around. A problem is thereby created. When people buy rank with 'positional' goods like expensive watches, they automatically push down other people's sense of self-worth. If I move up the status hierarchy with a new car, I reduce my neighbour's status and wellbeing.

Human beings do not do this consciously. Most people probably never give it a thought and might be upset if they imagined their purchases were hurting others' self-esteem. When you choose to buy a new car with beautiful alloy wheels, you do not sit at home thinking how this is going to affect the people next to you in traffic jams. But, barely consciously, affect them it will. That, barely consciously, is why you do it. Like other animals, humans thrive on social position.

Yet unwinnable spirals of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses are thus produced. These are ultimately destructive for society.

One day, I predict, governments will attempt to discourage envy-kindling consumption. So you might wish to buy the inlaid G-string now. One day a European Union 'conspicuous consumption' tax will be slapped on it. Maybe rightly.