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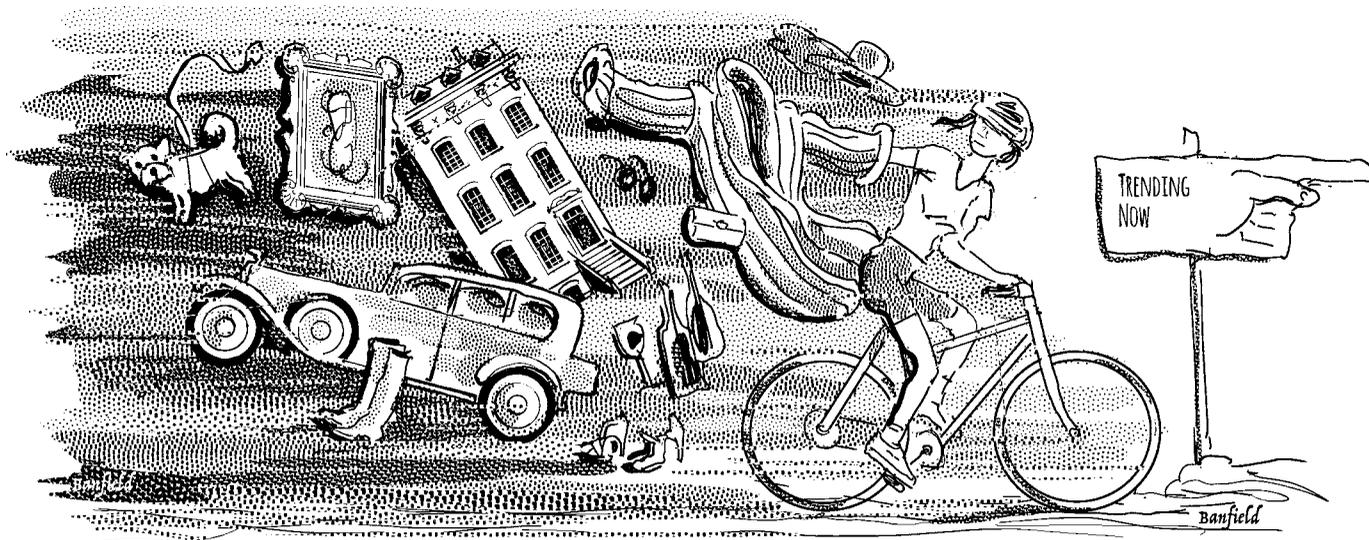
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Book Review by Helen Andrews

## INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

*The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett.  
Princeton University Press, 272 pages, \$29.95



**N**OBODY BUYS CHINA SETS ANYMORE. Americans spend less money on china and porcelain than they did 20 years ago—both in absolute terms and as a share of their incomes—across every social class, from the bottom quintile to the One Percent. This is one of many facts contained in the Consumer Expenditure Survey, a data set collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that can tell you everything from “the units of cornflakes the average Minnesotan consumes to how much money a New Yorker spends on shoes.” This data is the raw material for *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class* by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, a professor of public policy at the University of Southern California.

Her central finding is that today’s upper class spends less on “conspicuous consumption” (jewelry, cars, clothes) and more on “inconspicuous consumption” (organic groceries, CrossFit memberships, labor-intensive parenting). Who are the “aspirational class” of the subtitle? Well, white people spend more on inconspicuous goods than blacks and Hispanics with equivalent incomes, while blacks and Hispanics spend more on conspicuous goods. Residents of big cities spend more on inconspicuous consumption than those in small cities. In other words, the people who make up the “aspirational class” are exactly who you think they are: urban-dwelling, rich,

well-educated white people. They’re the ladies who brunch.

**W**HAT DOES THE SHIFT TO MORE discreet forms of status-signaling say about society’s values, priorities, and the way we live now? Currid-Halkett evidently believes that it means today’s ruling class is, compared to its predecessors, just *better*. Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) condemned the Gilded Age rich for lavishing their money on “conspicuous consumption” that was pointless at best and in some cases deliberately counterproductive. The purpose of a corset, according to Veblen, was to advertise the fact that a woman could afford to constrain her movement and limit her lung capacity because she did not need to work. “The wealthy of the twenty-first century are far savvier and more sensible than Veblen’s leisure class—they are channeling money into education, and goods and services that save them time and provide a better quality of life,” she writes. “Caring about where things come from, supporting local farmers, making home cooked meals, investing in education rather than handbags are certainly more constructive and establish better value systems than the flashy consumer culture of the 1980s and early 2000s.”

A rather self-serving conclusion, one might think—and Currid-Halkett leaves no doubt

that she is herself a member of the class she is discussing. Her personal anecdotes take place in settings like Whole Foods and prenatal yoga class. Even more incriminating is her tendency to lapse into credulous catalogue-speak when describing the brands under analysis. For example, she claims that Marc by Marc Jacobs, the high-end designer’s more affordable diffusion line, “may not be made with the same tailoring or quality of materials as the flagship brand,” but it does “capture the bohemianism and subversiveness that has made the designer so celebrated and revered.” No one would use the word “revered” about a fashion designer who was not speaking for herself.

The author’s immersion in the world of yoga moms is so obvious that the book sometimes seems like a sociological pretext for writing about the things she spends all her time thinking about anyway. This is a suspicion raised by much of what gets written—mostly by women, it must be said—about class and parenting in magazines like the *Atlantic* and *Slate*. The authors claim to be discussing grand questions like whether women can have it all, when really they are just obeying the old dictum to write what you know, which in their case is Lululemon yoga pants and Ergobaby carriers. This is frankly a step down from 1950s mommy lit like *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* and *Life Among the Savages*. Those earlier women were funnier and did



not take themselves so seriously, even though Shirley Jackson, who wrote serious novels as well as *Life Among the Savages* was far more genuinely intellectual than contemporary mommy-wars writers like Sandra Tsing Loh or Caitlin Flanagan.

**T**O BOLSTER HER CHEERLEADING FOR her own class, Currid-Halkett cites social-scientific studies purporting to give objective proof that upper-class folkways are superior. One British study found a correlation between breastfeeding and social mobility, which, according to Currid-Halkett, “suggest[s] that the combination of particular nutrients in breast milk along with the skin-to-skin mother-child bonding improves neurological development and emotional stress levels, thus enabling a child to thrive and subsequently move up the social ladder.”

That all sounds terribly convincing, except that breastfeeding’s class valence used to be reversed. Breastfeeding used to be the lower-class method, with formula or wet-nursing preferred by the middle-class and wealthy. The same is true of C-sections, which until 30 years ago were more commonly performed on the poor. The variability of these class associations makes one wonder whether the scientific establishment isn’t just coming up with plausible justifications for the consumer preferences of the socially prestigious.

Currid-Halkett finds it easy to take the new elite’s superiority for granted, because she knows nothing about the ruling classes of the past. She frequently alludes to the dark days before the meritocracy when status depended on “property held for generations,” “land ownership,” and “birthright.” (The word “birthright” appears six times in the first 25 pages; Currid-Halkett really does not like the idea of inherited privilege.) Those nasty old WASPs wasted their money on conspicuous consumption that was prized for its very pointlessness, and enforced arbitrary codes of “manners,” the acquisition of which “was often possible only for those who led a life of leisure.”

To call this a caricature would be giving it too much credit; caricatures exaggerate qualities that their targets actually possess. The WASPs were not obsessed with “birthright.” The quality they valued most highly

was character, as anyone would know who had read Louis Auchincloss, or for that matter Owen Johnson’s early 20th-century novel *Stover at Yale*. E. Digby Baltzell demonstrated in *The Protestant Establishment* (1964) that the WASP elite always integrated new blood with every generation, scholarship boys from the Midwest and bright Jewish immigrants from the East Coast. If there was a limit on the number of aspirants admitted each year, it was only because the successful acculturation of newcomers, and the maintenance of existing WASP norms, depended on a critical mass of the old elite staying in place.

Manners, too, are the very opposite of what Currid-Halkett says they are. She claims that they are nothing more than a way of signaling that one is rich enough to have the leisure time to study etiquette. In fact, good manners used to be prized by all classes, possibly even more by the lowest than the highest. “Good manners cost nothing,” as my grandmother used to say. I thought everyone’s grandmother did.

The new meritocratic elite “talk[s] about ideas, not stuff,” Currid-Halkett says. Here, at least, her strike at the old aristocracy hits home. Their topics of conversation were never intellectual. John P. Marquand, an even WASPier novelist than Auchincloss, makes the same observation in *H.M. Pulham, Esquire* (1941). The titular character, an old-fashioned Boston businessman, attends a party full of new Harvard men, the kind who chose careers in advertising and journalism rather than banking. “Upstairs after dinner all the men were taking about collective bargaining and about farm allotments,” he records. “[B]ut we were all simply paraphrasing what we had read somewhere, and the one who had read the most books was the best talker.” When the party is over, his wife asks whether he enjoyed the fact that “just for a change...we happened to be talking with interesting people.” Pulham says—showing the greater wisdom, perhaps—that he would rather have played bridge.

**D**OES CURRID-HALKETT HAVE ANYTHING bad to say about the new elite? She has just one complaint, which she repeats again and again whenever she senses that she is sounding too self-satisfied: inequality.

[T]he choice to be a better, more involved parent, exercise more, read more newspapers, probably does make us healthier, happier, and more engaged members of society.

But we cannot lose sight of the extent to which these practices are not even an option for huge segments of society. They are obviously not choices for the poor, the near-poor, and even huge swathes of the middle class.

This exaggerated sensitivity to inequality is even more self-flattering than unadulterated praise would be, because it assumes that the lower orders, if they could do so, would spend their time and money the way Currid-Halkett and her friends do. In her chapter on parenting, she lists a range of things California moms splurge on, including postnatal swim classes and mother-baby Mandarin instruction, then notes with sadness, “These are not the things...low-income moms are fretting about, even if they wish they could.” Do they wish they could? If you offered them a free course in Magda Gerber’s Research for Infant Educators’ (RIE) method—which promises to “discover your baby’s unique personality”—lower-class mothers might just laugh.

If I may, I’d like to volunteer some criticisms of the new upper class, since Currid-Halkett can’t think of any. Their vaunted intellectual superiority is amazingly superficial. Even graduates of elite schools no longer know basic facts about the American Founding and World War II, though they may know what was in Paul Krugman’s last column or Ta-Nehisi Coates’s last cover story, for all the intellectual benefit that confers. Their casual approach to clothes, which Currid-Halkett finds so refreshing, can be hard to distinguish from sheer laziness. Ten years ago, at brunch time, the sidewalk cafes of Dupont Circle or the Upper East Side were full of women in lovely floral dresses. Now most of the brunch-goers I see are wearing sweatpants. Some haven’t even bothered to change out of their pajamas. If that is the alternative, I would prefer a little conspicuous consumption.

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