

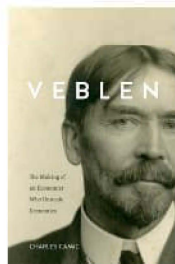
Charles Camic · 2020

Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics.

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Reading the introduction of Charles Camic's *Veblen* may leave an aftertaste of label fraud. To many sociologists – and particularly many economic sociologists – Thorstein Veblen is one of the canonized classics of the discipline. While written by a sociologist, *Veblen* deals with Veblen as a research subject, not with Veblen's output as part of sociology's theoretical toolkit. A second obvious classification – that this must be a biography, then, written by a sociologist – is also slightly misleading. After all, the book leaves out the genre-typical deep detours into the influential thinker's private and romantic life as well as his last twenty-five years.

Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics instead is a masterful piece in the sociologies of knowledge, ideas, and science. Camic's aim is to provide a historical reconstruction of the social constitution of Thorstein Veblen as a resourceful knowledge maker and innovator, embedded in his social environment, time, and place.

The theoretical argument underlying this historical account relies heavily on what the book calls *knowledge-making practices*. By tracing him through the emerging American research university

system and economics field, Camic demonstrates how Thorstein Veblen acquired the intellectual tools to materialize as the iconoclastic scholar and social critic that became canonized in the 20th century. The mechanism of practice acquisition is called *repetition-with-variation*. In different contexts, knowledge domains, institutions and academic relationships, Veblen was confronted with a core set of intellectual practices, incrementally solidifying into what Camic calls an “*academic second nature*,” which the budding knowledge maker increasingly takes for granted as the right way to construct knowledge, regardless of the problem at hand” (p. 41, emphasis added.)

The major opponent of Camic's account is the long-standing theory of Veblen's scholarly style as emerging from his outsider position in turn-of-century academia and U.S. society more broadly. The portrayal of the outcast Norwegian immigrant, developing a sharp eye for the idiocy of his “host society's” mores, has emerged in the 1930s and rarely been fact-checked. Camic calls this type of explanation *overhang narrative* and finds it in a range of important biographies. He challenges it by demonstrating how much of an academic “insider” Veblen was, working with many of the most influential thinkers of the time, and by tracing how core styles of Veblen's thought were omnipresent in his environment.

The book consists of six major empirical chapters, sandwiched by a programmatic introduction and theoretical chapter and a brief conclusion mainly dealing with Veblen's later years and legacy. The empirical chapters seamlessly switch between representations of Veblen's personal life, educational and professional journey, and the development of American society and

thought. The ease of presentation and breadth of information alone makes *Veblen* a joy to read. Especially the reconstructions of educational experiences is of impressive depth and detail, down to individual syllabi and class notes.

Chapter 3 sketches the history of the Veblens' immigration to the U.S. and family life as Northwestern farmers. It quickly moves on to Thorstein Veblen's years in school and at the just-established nearby Carleton College, where Veblen studied extensively with Germany-trained economist John Bates Clark. Camic outlines how studying the classics brought students into contact with confrontational intellectual styles as well as historical thinking. Moreover, Carleton brought Veblen, an exceptionally good student, to study the professionalizing natural sciences and emerging evolutionary thinking. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 trace Veblen's educational trajectory through Carleton, a brief teaching stay in Madison, Johns Hopkins, and Yale University.

While increasingly zeroing in on philosophy and political economy as intellectual foci, Veblen came into extensive contact with some of the country's most influential intellectuals. As Camic points out, many of the "Veblenite" features of Veblen the later thinker were in circulation at these young institutions: the valuing of the creation of new knowledge, a historical mode of thinking about economy and society, evolutionary conceptions of institutional development, a confrontational mode of thinking and arguing, and the routine distinction between socially productive and unproductive activities.

Potentially the most informative of the book, chapter 7 traces Veblen's route through Cornell University, where he went for a second PhD, towards a teaching position at the newly established

University of Chicago. Camic demonstrates how Veblen transitioned to becoming a professional knowledge producer at Chicago, for the time being working between the factions of the early American economics profession's infighting. Chapter 8 shows how Veblen put his acquired practices to use to intervene in the field, produce "economic theory," and launch attacks on received wisdom. Focusing *Theory of the Leisure Class* and *Theory of Business Enterprise*, Camic argues that Veblen's capabilities for becoming a leading academic and social critic should be understood as the result of thousands of hours of layered practical experiences.

Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics has been extensively reviewed as a biographical treatise. A casual survey of these reviews suggests a generally very favorable reception in this genre. As a piece of historical sociology, *Veblen* has been praised as exemplary as it tells history "from the past" (Andrew Abbott): it traces the emergence of Veblen the influential economist through the contingencies of his upbringing, rather than selecting explanatory episodes from the vantage point of the final outcome. I would like to add a third element of praise that connects to general social theory and economic sociology. In earlier work, Charles Camic has been among the major proponents of recovering the notion of *habit* from the behaviorist notion of quasi-automatic routine. In Camic's reconstruction, Veblen emerges as an entrepreneurial, innovative figure by creatively applying recombinations of acquired habits to new problems. *Veblen* may be of interest to scholars in economic sociology investigating innovation and entrepreneurship as it outlines a genuinely non-behaviorist way to think about the habitual bases of creativity.