Thorstein Veblen
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Knut Odner and Marjorie Gluck Plotkin
Unveiling the Veblen monument at Høre school, Valdres, Norway, on the farmland from which Thorstein Veblen’s parents left for the United States in 1847. Thorstein Veblen left no direct descendants, but members of the family attended.

From left to right: Doris Langseth, whose grandmother was Thorstein’s cousin; Knut Wollebøk, Norway’s ambassador to the United States; Kari Veblen, Veblen’s great-niece (her grandmother was Thorstein’s elder sister Emily Veblen Olsen); Knut Haalien, mayor of the municipality of Vang, Valdres.

Photo credit: Geoffrey Hodgson.
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Thorstein Bunde Veblen was born on 30 July 1857 and passed away on 3 August 1929, exactly one month before the US stock market peaked and less than three months before Black Thursday saw the US economy collapse into the Great Depression. Veblen’s warnings against the negative aspects of a market economy – of ‘the price system’ – that favoured finance at the neglect of production very soon proved to be more than justified.

This book is the result of a conference marking the 150th anniversary of Veblen’s birth, held in Valdres, Norway, from where his parents migrated ten years before Thorstein was born. The conference was held at Radisson SAS Resort Beitostølen, where it is possible to see all the way to the summer pastures of the Veblen farms. The organising committee consisted of Knut Odner, Ingeborg Kongslien, Terje Hasle Joranger – all from the University of Oslo – and Erik Reinert of The Other Canon Foundation. Kongslien and Joranger both hail from Valdres.

Following the international conference, a very well attended public meeting was held at Høre School, located on the former property of the Veblen farm. The unveiling of the Veblen memorial stone, shown as the frontispiece of this volume, formed part of this meeting with the people of Valdres. Another meeting, in Norwegian, marking the Veblen anniversary was held at Stalheim Hotel, Voss, organised by Trygve Refsdal and the group behind the well-known Skjerheim Seminar.

The Veblen anniversary in Norway was also marked with a book exhibition at the main university library in Oslo, organised by librarian Pål Lykkja, also from Valdres. The speech made by Head Librarian Bredo Berntsen on the opening of the exhibition was – appropriately for the Norwegian setting – entitled ‘Thorstein Veblen – The forgotten social scientist’. This book exhibition later moved to Vang Municipal Library in Valdres.

The Valdres conference was made possible by grants from Vang Kommune (Municipality of Vang), Vang Sparebank (Vang Savings Bank), Mr William C. Melton – who also financed the restoration of Veblen’s childhood home in Nerstrand, Minnesota – and from Stiftelsen Fritt Ord (Freedom of Expression Foundation), Oslo. The organising committee and the editors are grateful for all the support given to the Veblen commemorations in Norway by the people and institutions mentioned above, to the authors who contributed to this volume, and to numerous others who helped revive the memory of Veblen and his work. A special thank you goes to Fernanda Reinert whose invaluable assistance extended from the preparations for the conference to the last galley proofs, and to the publishing staff supporting the Anthem Other Canon book series. The editors are also grateful to Leif Høeghs Stiftelse (Leif Høegh’s Foundation), Oslo, for
its generous support. Professor Reinert’s research for this volume was partially funded by grant No. 8097 by the Estonian Science Foundation.

It so happened that the 150th anniversary of Thorstein Veblen’s birth took place just a few months before the start of a new financial crisis which once again made important, but almost forgotten, aspects of his work extremely relevant.
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Thorstein Bunde Veblen (1857–1929) may no longer feature on the curricula of most economics students, but in terms of editions of his books published and doctoral work dedicated to his work and legacy he remains America’s most famous economist. Veblen is the intellectual father of the two most influential economic schools to offer an alternative to today’s mainstream economics: evolutionary economics and institutional economics. He vivisected modern capitalism and redrew the very framework of social science, and his renown goes well beyond the Ivory Tower. His name, alongside his signature concepts such as ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘vested interests’, appears in scholarly studies as well as novels and popular media, from the works of novelist John Dos Passos to *Fortune Magazine*. Other great economists may be cited in academic articles, but theatrical plays are rarely dedicated to their persons and their names are seldom invoked in comedy films as is Veblen’s. His international reach extended far beyond the Atlantic communities: six of Veblen’s books have been translated into Japanese, and at least two into Chinese. But who was he?

In a 1924 letter – written on the stationary of the New School for Social Research where he was employed at the time – Veblen describes himself to a certain ‘Mr. Pritchard’ as ‘an average person with few and slight ties of family or country, being born of Norwegian parents in America and educated at various American schools, and having never been hard at work or very busy’. The present volume, the proceedings of an international conference held in Valdres, Norway, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth, can fruitfully be seen as a meditation upon these words. It is obvious from the response that Mr Pritchard had wished to learn who Veblen was, where he came from and what had made him such a penetrating observer of the modern world; he had wished, in short, to get under Veblen’s skin. Veblen disappointed his hopes, but we hope that this volume will go some way towards satisfying the curiosity of a Pritchard, shedding light on Veblen’s simultaneously evasive and revealing reply.

Veblen’s reply to Mr Pritchard gives some indication of the tenor of this volume. While far from average and often (if quietly) overworked, Veblen was indeed born to Norwegian parents and educated at various American universities, and a cipher for deciphering his enigma lies precisely in the interplay of these distinctive elements of his personal history, ever obscured by his penchant for irony and understatement, or even by his playfulness. Tellingly enough, his two stepdaughters gave him the nickname *toyse*, rendered as *toyse*, which means ‘kidding’ or ‘playing games’ in Norwegian.
Partially because Veblen himself, however indirectly and ambiguously, had suggested the relevance of his personal experiences for his intellectual development, scholars have often given biographical emphases to the study of his ideas. This book shares this emphasis, but is based on a broader conception of Veblen’s ‘persona’, comprehensive of his family background as well as academic experiences and the institutions that shaped both, and aims at opening up new avenues for interpreting the relation between Veblen’s person and his ideas. It is divided into four main sections, containing essays on different aspects of Veblen’s personal and intellectual story: his cultural origins and personal life; his education and intellectual formation; his politics; and his economics. Some of the contributions focus on Veblen’s writings, and others purely on his biography, but our hope is that the sum of this commemoration, like a literary diorama, will end up giving a holistic view of Veblen’s intellectual background and development, from the moment his family left Norway to sail to the United States, to Veblen’s Cassandra-like premonitions of the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

Part of Veblen’s enduring appeal lies in his evocative analysis of the ‘modern’ condition, which he depicted as characterised by two major sacrifices: the sacrifice of technological concerns to the worlds of speculation, advertising and sabotage of technological change, and that of savings and investments to financial capitalism and a widespread frenzy of conspicuous consumption. Even if posterity has not appreciated Veblen’s prophetic vocation with the same enthusiasm it has those of Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber, the contemporary resonance of Veblen’s ideas has increasingly been recognised, much like the similarities between our era and the ‘Gilded Age’ that inspired his criticisms. ‘History does not repeat itself’, Mark Twain is supposed to have said, ‘it rhymes’. The precise context and epic crises faced by Veblen are crises of the past; yet their consonance with our present predicaments is food for thought. Though the present endeavour seeks to contextualise Veblen’s life and writings to a greater extent than has been done before, it also includes contributions that draw explicitly on his insights and develop them in light of current concerns. After all, as was remarked at the 100th anniversary of his birth, Veblen formulated ‘a theory of becoming, not a theory of being’, a theory meant to dialogue with future interlocutors. In the same spirit, this collection of essays represents a waypoint, at which one can pause to contemplate the varied terrain that has been covered and chart future courses for scholarship on this remarkable man and his remarkable ideas.

Erik Reinert’s preliminary essay, following this introduction, argues for the interdependence of the different sections of the book as seen from a variety of Veblenian contexts: Valdres, the original home of the Veblens; Veblen’s work in relation to contemporary Norwegian culture and its idealistic zeitgeist; his type of economics in the setting of a contextual – rather than whiggish – understanding of the history of economic thought; and Veblen in relation to industrial sabotage and financial crises as they recur again today.

Norwegian Origins and Personal Life

The question of Veblen’s heritage, and how this influenced his personality and his work, has always played a curious role in Veblen scholarship. It is true that, in the wake of
the Great Depression, he was allowed into the hallowed club of dead white prophets of social science, but his role in the canon was never free from ambiguity. From the 1950s onwards, economics and sociology underwent an epistemological revolution favouring specialisation over the interdisciplinarity so characteristic of Veblen’s work. At the same time, mathematics became the dominant language of economics and brought the discipline away from Veblen’s evolutionary approach. Finally, growing opposition to communism made Veblen’s critiques of ‘vested interests’ and ‘absentee ownership’ politically suspect. In hindsight, it is indeed striking that the same period which witnessed the nadir of Veblen’s fame as an individual, when David Riesman drew on second-hand sources to describe him as ‘put off and alienated from his parents’ parochial culture but without the ability fully to assimilate and accept the available forms of Americanism’, coincided with that in which his ideas, though often divorced from his name, enjoyed the greatest currency. In fact, Veblen’s supposedly ‘outsider’ criticisms of advertising, the hegemony of the leisure class, conspicuous consumption and big business ethics, like his analysis of the relation between management and ownership, gave birth to a central current of quintessentially American criticism, which included such luminaries as David Chandler, Charles Wright Mills and John Kenneth Galbraith, who often developed largely independently of Veblen’s name. Galbraith himself hinted at this when, in private correspondence, he admitted that ‘while I am a great admirer of Veblen, I am not that much of a scholar of his works’. This curious divorce between Veblen – the ‘misfit’ or the assumed crypto-Marxist – and his ideas produced paradoxical results: Veblen’s marginality in many ways supplanted his ideas as the primary object of scholarly attention. Curiously enough, Veblen himself was responsible for this development. In a once famous article on the ‘Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe’, Veblen offered an image of himself in the guise of a sceptical Humean and wandering Jew, ‘a disturber of the intellectual peace’, a ‘wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon’. This poetic self-portrait, which almost sounds like an epitaph, profoundly influenced the earliest accounts of Veblen’s work and life, beginning with Joseph Dorfman’s epic 1934 biography. Not only, however, did Dorfman fail to appreciate the idealism of Veblen’s self-representation, he did not distinguish carefully enough between Veblen’s pride in intellectual marginality and his supposed social alienation. This is why he traced both back to Veblen’s solitary youth in a transplanted Norwegian environment – a sort of “Scandinavian ghetto” in Manitowoc County, Wisconsin – where ostensibly not a word of English was spoken. Since then, with a few exceptions (such as C. Wright Mills’s attempt to Americanise Veblen by presenting him as ‘the best critic of America that America ever produced’), scholarship revelled in Veblen’s supposed social dysfunctionality, his lecherousness and his complete contextual alienation until Sylvia Yoneda, Russell Bartley and Rick Tilman inaugurated a new, revisionist trend in Vebleniana in the 1980s. Yoneda and other revisionist scholars have highlighted Veblen’s sociability and re-evaluated the importance of the Manitowoc neighbourhood as a multilingual community of immigrants, in which Veblen familiarised himself with English, learned German and assimilated to the American way of life. Most importantly, they have demonstrated that Dorfman