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The Relevance of Thorstein Veblen

DAVID RIESMAN and STAUGHTON LYND

The interpretation of Veblen offered in these pages emphasizes above all the ambiguity, even the internal contradictions, of his thought. Inconsistency, as Emerson said, need not be altogether a defect: it may reflect a complex and honest mind working on inherently difficult problems. Yet we remain more critical of Veblen than do a good many of those who have written centennial interpretations of his work and influence; this is in some measure because we attempt to view his writings as a whole, where contradictions are most in evidence, rather than taking them book by book or theme by theme. Moreover, we attempt to link the man and the work, not to diminish or explain away the latter, but to try to

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This reappraisal is drawn from three sources: the Introduction to a new edition of Mr. Riesman's book on Veblen, reissued by Charles Scribner's Sons in September, Copyright © 1960 by David Riesman, and used by permission of the publisher; an article written by Mr. Riesman and Mr. Lynd for the April 9, 1960, issue of *The New Statesman*; and new material not previously presented by either author.

make sense of its incompatibilities. Thus, for example, it remains a problem for us why Veblen invoked over and over again the virtues of small-scale neighborly life among peasants and savages, while at the same time praising the industrial technology which worked in his view toward ever-increasing centralization. So, too, we must ask what he intended in attacking the psychology of classical economics for assuming men to be passive, while at the same time he mocked at reformers as tinkering busybodies. And, since war and preparation for war preoccupy us as these pages are being written, we also want to ask what kind of radical was the Veblen who, although strongly against war, supported American entry into the First World War, when La Follette, Debs and Randolph Bourne, along with many other brave and farsighted men, opposed it?

Veblen was a reserved and idiosyncratic person, who expressed, in a language all his own, attitudes toward American society which were then novel and are today still unconventional (it follows that, as one's judgments of America shift, so will one's reaction to Veblen himself). His wordplay, his thought and his personality were for him means of concealment as well as of expression, and each can become a barrier to the reader seeking rapport with the writer. Henry Adams, unlike Veblen in so many ways, was like him in the obsessive impersonality with which he referred to himself, as in the famous third-person manner of his *Autobiography*. Both men, seemingly, felt inwardly crushed and suffocated by the

Gilded Age of late nineteenth-century America: a world, as Adams wrote, in which a sensitive man could not bear to live without a shudder. And this led both men to hesitate in expressing their feelings. Yet these feelings leaked in, and were among the many influences pressing toward a climate in which educated people today feel free—sometimes virtually compelled!—to open themselves up, to express themselves, to be sincere and direct. Many people who have grown up in this more permissive milieu find it hard to be sympathetic with Veblen's indirection and irony; although they might bear easily with myth and symbolism in poetry and tale, they are impatient with an economist who doesn't come right out with what he thinks.

More assertive men than Veblen reacted to him in his own time with a similar impatience. Thus, H. L. Mencken said that Veblen's language often merely clothed the obvious in sonorous prolixity. He was right up to a point: Veblen was at times trapped within his self-defensive apparatus, and he repeated himself interminably, burying an unforgettable phrase—and the trenchant idea behind it—in wordy exegesis. Viewed, however, with less impatience and with sympathy for a man who could not believe that anybody was listening, Veblen's style strikes us, after many readings, as brilliant and inventive—a genuine contribution to American polemical and scholarly prose.

But it is a mixture of strangeness and simplicity in Veblen's intellectual framework that probably inhibits and confuses his would-be readers even more than do the complexities of his personality or the style he used as a mask. Because key Veblenian terms like "instinct," "institution" and "barbarian" are in common use, we are overready to assume we understand the special sense in which Veblen used them. In fact, it would almost be better to consider his terminology as one does Plato's *hubris* and *nemesis*, or Machiavelli's *virtù* and *fortuna*: words which because of their strangeness are rightly suspected to clothe unfamiliar meanings. Veblen, for all his claim to derive only common-sense conclu-

sions from merely everyday words, in fact relied on an anthropology, an economics, a psychology, and a philosophy which are superseded or out-of-fashion today. Posing as the king's jester or the village idiot, he was actually encyclopedic in his learning, and original, not as a researcher in the modern sense, but as an "armchair theorist" who made an extraordinary synthesis from derived materials.

What were these materials? In economics, Veblen followed the German "historical school" of Schmoller and Sombart, which emphasized the development of economic systems and institutions, rather than the mathematical interplay of economic interests within a capitalist system assumed to be eternal. In philosophy, Veblen was a disciple of Kant, taking from him especially the notion that men look out on their experience with preconceived interpretative categories. Owing to his admiration for Darwin and his insistence on evolutionary method in every field of knowledge, Veblen distrusted Hegel's developmental logic as non-empirical and goal-directed ("teleological"). In fact, in his distrust of any romantic, Hegelian-influenced view of man and history, any utopian image based on a not merely biological understanding of man's essential nature, Veblen was very much in the Anglo-American tradition of hardheaded empiricism, more narrowly pragmatic than John Dewey or William James.

Yet at the same time his psychology was largely shaped by these two men, one of whom (Dewey) was a contemporary of his at the University of Chicago. James and Dewey insisted that human nature was active, unfolding and whole. Veblen, from this same point of view, never tired of accusing his fellow economists of retaining a conception of the human mind as merely passive and receptive, propelled by discrete external events, at a time when psychology had left this view behind. However, Veblen relied also on the concept of "instinct," which hardly seems holistic or purposive to us; nor did he link it with "impulse," as Dewey was later to do in *Human Nature*

and Conduct: there were elements of reductionism in Veblen's thought, partly as a way of reminding himself that he was "scientific" and not nonsensically metaphysical, partly perhaps also reflecting his deep personal passivity and despair. (Freud, who handled the biological concepts of the instincts more inventively, also selected among current concepts of science those compatible with his more active pessimism.)

Anthropology was the one major field on which Veblen drew without at the same time feeling called on to reform it. It was a new discipline and, as he saw it, wholly and beneficially under the influence of Darwinian method. This anthropology which he knew and trusted conceived that all mankind had evolved through a definite sequence of social systems; and that the primitive mind, characterized by an "animism" which considered all things to be living and goal-directed, likewise evolved by regular stages toward science and secularism. Veblen's own schema of social evolution involved two essential stages. The first, "savagery," was for him peaceful, co-operative and good. The second, "barbarism," was competitive, warlike and spiritually oriented to personal rather than communal achievement, hence (as Veblen saw it) to a falsely teleological rendering of external reality. All this Veblen elaborated in great detail, and correlated with definite stages in the development of technology, in his conception the dynamic, causal factor. The daring and satirical twist which Veblen gave to the then-common anthropological assumptions lay in his bland assertion that modern society was, in its essential tone, only a latter-day barbarism.

In this distinction between a peaceful, industrious, co-operative "savagery," and an aggressive, parasitical, competitive "barbarism," Veblen knitted together the intellectual strands which he inherited. The contrast between "savagery" and "barbarism" was for him a contrast of cultural atmospheres, of ways of getting a living, of personality types, of outlooks on the world. And this perception of bellicosity and peaceableness as fundamental themes of

history and social psychology should not be confused with the conceptual machinery Veblen employed to express it. It is not particularly important whether a peaceful, harmonious society really existed at the dawn of history, or is only a hope cast in the form of a fictive past, like the "state of nature" of Locke and Rousseau. What matters is that Veblen's sense of the central problems of American society, when stripped down to this quintessential contrast of two ways of life, has enduring truth. To view modern civilization as still barbaric at its core seems less funny today than to those who laughed in 1899 (at the end of the "splendid little war" with Spain) at *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Veblen's black-and-white juxtaposition of "savagery" and "barbarism" was in good part derived from the Populist atmosphere of the Middle West in the post-Civil War decades (Veblen was twenty in 1877). The historian Richard Hofstadter has brilliantly characterized the "folklore of Populism": the mélange of inarticulate major premises which held together the strongest popular movement in American history. Populists believed in a golden age of peace and happiness in the past; the natural harmony of society if uncorrupted by power and money; a "dualistic version of social struggles"; and a "conspiracy theory of history."¹ One does not have to read many pages of Veblen to find each of these themes not merely present, but central to his thought.

The "captains of industry" Veblen satirized—the stock manipulators, bankers and other assorted robber barons who had come to pelf and power after the Civil War—were creating widespread apprehension, not only among the impoverished wheat and cotton farmers who flocked to the Populist party, but also among the business and professional men of the "old" middle classes who led the Progressive movement. To compare the barons, as Veblen did, with the feudal lords of the Middle Ages, or to attack "Wall Street" as a con-

¹ *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York, 1956), p. 62.

spiracy, as the Populists did, may strike us today as wild exaggeration; to understand these responses, we must put ourselves back into a period when speculators "under cover of night and cloud" (in Veblen's repeated phrase) made and unmade prosperity, and when industrialists could sneer "The public be damned!" and "Ain't I got the power?" By their tastes as well as their tactics, moreover, the *nouveaux riches* invited comparison with feudalism. They built castles; laid out towns for their own sort (like Tuxedo Park near New York City, which imported a village of Slavic workmen to make its roads, and one of Italians to tend its lawns); bought paintings and founded the D.A.R.; discovered family coats-of-arms and read Sir Walter Scott. Others beside Veblen spoke of a "new feudalism"; and the first illustrator of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* put the faces of contemporary businessmen and politicians on Mark Twain's armored knights; so, too, in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain paid his respects to the Gilded Age (his own phrase) by naming his small-time shysters "Duke" and "King." Exploring opposite extremes of language—the one colloquial, the other a parody of academes—Twain and Veblen restated the Jeffersonian antithesis of the yeoman's simple and co-operative style of life versus the aristocratic pretensions and corrupt and warlike values of the well-to-do.

Populism no doubt oversimplified Jefferson's own outlook—one so complex that one can find in his letters precedent for a wide variety of positions. Moreover, Richard Hofstadter, Oscar Handlin and other historians have recently emphasized that, while Populism raised for the first time as public issues the great themes of modern American reform—such as the graduated income tax, government regulation of monopolies, direct election of senators, government subsidization of farm surpluses—it also fostered darker currents of popular social attitudes: racism and isolationism, and a quasi-paranoid and demagogic cast of thought. Much recent writing has tended to emphasize these darker currents, as con-

trasted to the more hopeful ones, not only in American Populism, but also in many popular revolutionary movements; modern totalitarianism has made many non-Communist intellectuals uneasy about any forms of political militancy, with its inevitable exaggerations, its dangers for intellectual and artistic cultivation, its potential threat to an orderly, sober and constitutional democracy. But we can see (especially clearly, perhaps, after eight years of the Eisenhower regime) that political moderation is not a lasting or creative quiescence; that an age of reform looks better than an age of stagnation; that the end of ideology could betoken the end of ideas. While there are undoubted linkages of content and form between, let us say, the elder La Follette and the late Senator McCarthy, there are also enormous differences of tone, buoyancy and context. The gentle, yet shrewd, humanity of Senator George Norris is somehow missing from our contemporary picture of the demagogic and mean-spirited side of Populism.² All this has been well stated by C. Vann Woodward, who argues that while

² It may be objected that La Follette and Norris were "Progressives," not "Populists." This distinction has been made by Oscar Handlin and other historians, and there is certainly a difference of tone between the middle-class, controlled kind of reform (which Woodrow Wilson himself typified) and the Populist mass movement, the "rising sea of discontent," as so many genteel writers of the time called it. Yet the elements of continuity between Populism and Progressivism are extremely strong. In his autobiography, La Follette wrote of the Granger Movement swirling around him when he was a boy. The states which pioneered in the Progressive reforms of women's suffrage or initiative, referendum and recall, which gave heavy votes to La Follette in 1924 and sent Norris, Borah, Wheeler, and like-minded men to the Senate, were almost without exception west of the Mississippi. Populists and Progressives were alike, moreover, in their resentment not only against the robber barons at the top of society, who were forcing society away from a Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ideal, but also against the new "inferior" immigrants who were coming in at the bottom and who, in their way, seemed to be subverting white, Anglo-Saxon values. Thus, if a Populist like Tom Watson turned in the end to racism, Progressives in the era of Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson turned to a "white man's burden" imperialism.

the Populists were occasionally anti-Semitic, this was seldom a salient theme, and quite negligible in comparison with frequent courageous advocacy in the South of solidarity between Whites and Negroes.³

Veblen's future impact on our thought will probably depend less on his specialized contributions than on the outcome of this debate about Populism and about political radicalism generally. For it is a measure of Veblen's strength as a social critic that no rounded judgment of his work can be made that is not also a judgment of American society, now as well as then. If, as the antagonists of Populism assert, the evils perceived by the Populists were more imaginary than real, and in any case irrelevant today, and if the fear to be naïve becomes a stronger political motive than indignation at cruelty and injustice, then the inclination will be to stress the psychological sources of both Populism and Veblenism at the expense of (rather than in clarification of) their substantive content. A quite different approach will follow if one agrees, as we are inclined to do now, with William Dean Howells' summary of the Populist impulse (in his introduction to Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*): "They feel that something is wrong, and they know the wrong is not theirs." Undoubtedly, the Populists, including Veblen, oversimplified the wrong, and regarded the wrongdoers with a Philistine and at times vindictive hatred. But in reading Veblen we must never forget that he lived and wrote at a time when Americans, both on the land and in the cities, could and did starve to death; when homeless men wandered the roads without hope of public succor; and when the newly rich and complacent lived a far more Philistine life than their humanitarian critics, condemning those who failed not only to terrible poverty but to

guilt for not having "made it" when, according to doctrine, anyone could.

In contrast to his alienated, Populist tone stands Veblen's attitude toward the First World War. When he left academic life to join Wilson's war government it marked a startling departure from his customary ironic skepticism toward efforts at reform. His book *The Nature of Peace* wavers between an unusually exposed plea for intelligent peacemaking, and the more familiar claim to be attempting nothing more than "a systematic knowledge of things as they are."⁴ In no other work does Veblen stray so often and so far from the naturalism he shared with novelists like Stephen Crane and Frank Norris: what Parrington calls "a pessimistic realism that sets man in a mechanical world."⁵ Here is an inconsistency which calls not so much for analysis or satire, as for pondering by all those who seek to combine social analysis with personal action for social change.

The dichotomy between peaceful "savagery" and predatory "barbarism" appears in Veblen's war writing as a contrast between the Allied and the Central powers. Like Woodrow Wilson, Veblen's attitude toward peace and war embraced two powerful sentiments. One was a horror of war as such, a tendency to believe that no provocation could be sufficient excuse to unleash the holocaust. Wilson expressed this view most notably in his "peace without victory" speech of January, 1917, delivered just at the time Veblen was composing *The Nature of Peace*. In that book, however, Veblen was already straining forward to the new attitude adopted by Wilson in his war message of April: the conviction that autocratic governments could not be trusted to make a lasting negotiated peace, hence that war must be pressed on to victory "to make the world safe for democracy."

In hindsight, or even in the perspective of the many radicals who at the time re-

³ See "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR*, XXIX (Winter, 1959-1960), pp. 55-72. Woodward adds that when the Populist program failed, many Populist leaders themselves turned sour and rancorous, only then using racism as a form of attack on the status quo.

⁴ *An Inquiry into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of its Perpetuation* (New York, 1919), vii.

⁵ *Main Currents in American Thought*, III (New York, 1930), xii.

fused to go along with Wilson, Veblen's identification of the Allies and the United States with democracy seems curious—as no doubt the phrase “free world,” used indiscriminately to refer to the anti-Communist coalition of our day, will seem a generation hence, provided that the very antithesis allows a new generation to grow up. Before the war, Veblen plainly regarded American capitalists as latter-day barbarians; how is it that he suddenly sees the Germans as the real barbarians? How is it that the skeptical student of propaganda, who was later to dub advertising “creative psychiatry,” fell so unguardedly for the anti-German war propaganda of the Allies and the Yankee Easterners whom Veblen had previously mistrusted?

Do we deal here with the frequent phenomenon that the more suspicious a person is, the more gullible he can become? Suppressing and hence keeping unclarified his own radicalism, Veblen imagined that he could transpose into the conflict between the Allies and the Entente powers his dichotomy between peaceful habits and institutions (“savagery”) and warlike and predatory ones (“barbarism”). And, concluding in terms now quite familiar to us (as we fight the Cold War with Maginot-Line slogans about Munich and appeasement) that Germany's dynastic state was not only evil and oppressive in itself, but inherently expansionist and impossible to treat with, Veblen came to justify war itself, chafing as angrily as Theodore Roosevelt at Wilson's effort to mediate rather than fight.

When Wilson did declare war, Veblen came for the duration to persuade himself that Wilson might go so far as basically to modify American capitalism in the interest of winning the war and making a lasting peace. Veblen did not realize that Wilson's anti-German moralism was not so sharp as his own, nor could he be aware of how tormented Wilson felt the very night before he asked Congress to declare war. So, too, Veblen's hopes for Wilson as a revolutionary blinded him to evidence to the contrary, such as Wilson's antagonistic atti-

tude toward labor, toward Debs, and toward Mexican uprisings against American investments and dollar diplomacy there. (Such self-deception was to find devotees among Franklin Roosevelt's admirers in the Second World War and, *pari passu*, in the Cold War.)

Ironically, we know today that Wilson's pronouncement of the famous Fourteen Points in January, 1918, was in good part brought on by the Russian Bolsheviks, who published the secret Allied treaties and sent forth to the world the slogan of “no annexation and no indemnities.”⁶ Yet the Bolshevik slogans were themselves borrowed from the speeches of Wilson; and in this complicated interplay of appearance and reality, the sources of Veblen's later hatred of Wilson and angry pro-Bolshevism are to be found.

Thus, in the Veblen of 1914-1917, we meet a man whose mind was not the “hard clear prism” Dos Passos spoke of, whose stance was not the unwavering hostility to the status quo in all its aspects which is so often attributed to him. Rather this is a Veblen whose judgment was quickly questioned by scholarship, as in other cases it was rendered obsolete by events.⁷

None of this, however, is said in a spirit of debunking Veblen. Few are the saints who utterly escape the temptation to join “their” nation in a moral crusade against an obvious international wrongdoer! And, to the extent that we have succeeded in overcoming the contamination of nationalism within ourselves, so that we can look with appropriate horror at the policy of deterrence and see through the fanatical rationalizations with which moral men justify it, we are in debt to that more fully human side of Veblen that saw war as the

⁶ Cf. the authoritative and enlightening discussion by George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War* (Princeton, 1956), Chapters VII, XII.

⁷ Thus ten years after America's entrance into the war, Sidney B. Fay was writing in *The Origins of the World War* (New York, 1927), II, 522: “Germany did not plot a European War, did not want one, and made genuine, though too belated, efforts to avert one.”

health of the dynastic (or, as we would say, garrison) state, and saw peace as the health of mankind. Beyond that, Veblen had a sense of the ways in which technology could be married to nationalism for war-making purposes, and of the contribution of the "underlying population" to a war-like animus, so that while he is far from a complete guide to the present world conflict, he is a good preliminary one. Like other Midwesterners of a later generation—we think of Wendell Willkie, George Kennan, Harold Stassen, Glenway Wescott, among many very unlike men—he found his way to an intellectually cosmopolitan outlook.

In view of all this, it is remarkable that Veblen has found no place in the mainstream of socialist thought, in America or abroad. The key themes of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* were first presented by Veblen in the context of socialist theory, as an attempt to deal with the failure of Marx's prediction of increasing material misery among the industrial proletariat. In one of his earliest essays, "Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism" (1891), Veblen forcefully advanced the thesis of relative deprivation and in this connection introduced the conception (although not yet the term) of conspicuous consumption:

The existing system does not make, and does not tend to make, the industrious poor poorer, as measured absolutely in terms of livelihood; but it does tend to make them relatively poorer, in their own eyes, as measured in terms of comparative economic importance, and, curious as it may seem at first sight, this is what seems to count.

Veblen saw that the increase of well-being among industrial workers has led to their bourgeoisification through their leisure-time activities. He saw that the leisure class in modern Western societies extends almost to the very bottom, including all those who "keep up appearances." Yet, he argues, in this early work, the motive of envy among workingmen may be strong enough to bring on a socialist transformation.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, this notion of defeating the devil by his own devices no longer satisfies Veblen. He has begun to develop his most original conception: that the psychological discipline of factory work will train men to think matter-of-factly rather than subjectively, to place emulation and aggression second to the impersonal needs of the communal technology. In this hope were fused many other Veblenian motifs, and in particular his contention that work was not (as the "received economics" postulated) naturally distasteful to man.

The opaque discipline of modern machine-tending, Veblen argues, can act as a solvent on institutions grounded in animistic and self-centered thinking. The impact of the machine Veblen conceived to be largely negative: its effect on the workingman's thought would be toward nihilism. In *The Theory of Business Enterprise* he wrote:

There is little indication of a constructive movement toward any specific arrangement to take the place of the institution whose existence is threatened. There is a loosening of the bonds, a weakening of conviction as to the full truth and beauty of the received domestic institutions, without much of a consensus as to what is to be done about it, if anything. In this, as at other junctures of a similar kind, the mechanically employed classes, trained to matter-of-fact habits of thought, show a notable lack of spontaneity in the construction of new myths or conventions, as well as in the reconstruction of the old.

But Veblen—and this brings us to the center of his thought—was not dismayed, as for example Tocqueville or Durkheim were dismayed, by the attrition of the going cultural consensus, because he had faith in the acultural or biological man who would thereby be set free.

In the introduction to *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and in the chapter on "The Conservation of Archaic Traits," Veblen gives us his revised picture of man in the state of nature. This was the peaceful, primitive Ur-society which he thought he found in such contemporary groups as the Eskimo and the Pueblo Indians, in pre-

Christian Scandinavia as portrayed in the Icelandic sagas, and indeed throughout the folklore and archaeological remains of earliest man.

They are small groups and of a simple (archaic) structure; they are commonly peaceful and sedentary; they are poor; and individual ownership is not a dominant feature of their economic system. . . . Indeed, the most notable trait common to members of such communities is a certain amiable inefficiency when confronted with force or fraud.

Enormously influenced by Darwinism, Veblen saw this putative Golden Age as the social environment in which the generic traits of human nature had been biologically selected and fixed. Thus he thought he had a scientific basis for hope: that the mélange of predatory institutions brought in by nomadic barbarians, and in the saddle since, were but a cultural crust which could be scraped away, leaving man as he was biologically meant to be, a creature on the whole willing to live and let live.

This core conception of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* has serious flaws. Veblen was aware of some of them. He knew that the archaic communal life to which, in his view, man was by nature suited, was small-scale and local, while the modern industrial discipline is far-flung and expansive. In a note to *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*, he observed that the "small-scale, half anarchistic, neighborhood plan of society would be enforceable only within such territorial bounds as would be covered by the habitual range of neighborly contact," but,

In the course of time, though it appears to have occupied several thousand years of slow but scarcely broken advance, their excessive efficiency in the mechanic arts pushed the North-European peoples out of that state of culture answering to their natural bent. And ever since they so passed the technological limit of tolerance of that archaic scheme of use and wont they have been restlessly casting back for some workable compromise that would permit their ideal of "local self-government" by neighborly common sense to live somehow in the shadow of the large-scale coercive rule that killed it.

In the same book Veblen described how a pre-industrial society like Germany could appropriate the industrial arts and, far from being transformed by them, use them for its pre-existing, that is barbarian, purposes. He did not seem to see that a man conditioned by the cumulative fakery of the leisure-class world, where all was personalized and distorted, might be impervious to the cause-and-effect logic underlying the machine technology, and simply use his factory job as a source of the wherewithal to sustain an emulative life. Nor did he quite appreciate how factory work confines the purposeful bent which can make labor a delight, how, in contrast to all that James and Dewey taught, it permits the emotional engagement of only a fraction of the self.

What is the relevance of Veblen today? His social science was in large part a gloss on then-current agrarian attitudes; and where it broke new ground, as in his concept of the discipline of factory work, it leaves many questions unasked.

What survives is an attitude, not a doctrine. Veblen's legacy is the bleak and pungent quality of his belief that the social atmosphere of modern capitalism is in every way hostile to a peaceful, co-operative life. As an immigrant's son (he could not speak fluent English till well on in college) as well as a radical, Veblen was doubly alienated from his society. His detachment, both from the powers-that-be and the reform movements, made possible a thorough commitment to fundamental things.

These qualities remind one of Thoreau, although Veblen is even more bitter, withdrawn and passive. No one now bothers with Thoreau's theories, such as the notion of "correspondence" between the biological and mental worlds; and in a hundred years, if the interpretation here advanced is correct, few will remember "the instinct of workmanship" or the contrast of "savagery" and "barbarism." Veblen's social psychology will outlive its terminology, his Populist critique its time-bound enemies.

Veblen, like Thoreau, turned back to the enduring qualities of nature and life itself,

and arraigned American society as their betrayer. The cabins in the woods which both men frequented are a kind of symbol of this attitude. The fondness for nature and the natural, the rejection of all cant and hypocrisy, the "inner emigration," and in Veblen's case the unaggressive unkemptness and relaxed sexual attitudes—all these would seem to link the attitudes of these men to those of our contemporary Beats, or to the J. D. Salinger characters for whom also a cabin in the woods becomes a symbol of incorruptibility. But the differences are as profound. Neither Veblen nor Thoreau sought escape from the political conflicts of their time, but instead took risks for what they believed in. Both men were disciplined workers who never dreamed that messy behavior would provide an alibi for messy work. And while both men shared a post-Enlightenment distrust of the ravages and ridiculousness of which the human, and perhaps especially the academic, intellect is capable, neither man praised mindlessness nor was fundamentally anti-intellectual—surely not the Veblen who remained a life-long scholar and devotee of "idle curiosity." If they rejected aspects of their world, it was with the hope of changing them.

And yet it is at this point that the tragic fate of both men becomes most clear. Being, like so many Americans, clearer about "freedom from" than "freedom to," they tended in their bitterness and isolation to become solitary rebels; both men hurt and spurned the companionship they might have had. Escaping from fierce constraint, they distrusted all given authority, all given institutions: they sought (in Thoreau's words) "hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin."⁸

⁸ Cf. the similar rejection of institutions by Allen Wheelis, a psychoanalyst influenced by Veblen, in *The Quest for Identity* (1958).

We must indeed begin there—begin by seeing reality clear. But further steps, even toward the grasp of reality, require communal support, and this in turn depends on a human solidarity that neither Veblen nor Thoreau rejected, but that neither could call forth in self or other. Veblen was driven by his epoch to associate solidarity with "savagery," that is, with a prehistoric peaceable tribe. However, quite rejecting folksiness and sentimentality, Veblen also insisted that man must make his peace with the machine; much like C. P. Snow in his lectures on *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Veblen was sensitive to the snobbery and subtle inhumanity hidden in literary hostility to technology and to the modern world. Admiring both the matter-of-fact skepticism he believed industrial man to possess and the amiable, unassertive humanity he attributed to pre-industrial man, Veblen was unable in his own life or in his work to bridge the two cultures, or to envisage a post-industrial world that might be both abundant and fraternal.

Much as Freud saw the advance of civilization as a trap, in which man's libidinal and aggressive instincts become turned against himself, so Veblen saw the increase of human productivity as the very source of exploitation and waste: he has few suggestions as to how economic abundance, the fruit of the workmanship of the race, can be used to join men in fraternal solidarity rather than to divide them in emulation and war. With a pessimism characteristic of him, but far rarer in his day than in ours, he wrote:

History records more frequent and more spectacular instances of the triumph of imbecile institutions over life and culture than of peoples who have, by force of instinctive insight, saved themselves alive out of a desperately precarious institutional situation, such, for instance, as now faces the peoples of Christendom.