IX. ECONOMIC TECHNOCRACY: THE GADFLY AND THE PURITAN

"The moon is not shamed by the barking of dogs." Southwest
"After dark all cats are wildcats." Zuni

Following Marx and anticipating Demand-Side Economics were two idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, misanthropic thinkers who nevertheless defined more than an age. Neither one is properly speaking an economist, but economic psychology, an important even indispensable subtext in economics since David Hume, is unthinkable without them. The first is Thorstein Veblen [July 30, 1857-1929] whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* rightly reads like a send-up of the well-to-do, the second is Max Weber [April 21, 1864 – 1920] who although he did not sail with the Mayflower and was only a German professor could well have done so in giving the "Protestant Work Ethics" the most thoroughly Teutonic treatment that is has received to date.

Both were at heart technocrats who distrusted the profundities of men and opted to revive La Mettrie conception of Man-Machine. If that were possible this is not a step up from the Frankenstein monster of 'economic man' which we have already encountered, but it is a step down. Little wonder that the society based on such an abstraction would be savage under a thin veneer of culture.

Little wonder that such a society following such a psycho-economic, socio-economic 'recipe' would become psycho-socio-econon-pathic, even econo-pathetic! and profoundly unhappy. Both Weber and Veblen were themselves miserably unhappy as recent research has shown, they did define the 20th Century like few philosopher peers and they, though not being the primal cause of the 20th Centuries large-scale miseries and unhappinesses, did much to give it its highest expression.

Distrusting professional economists they opted for the Great Engineer to run a given country and stipulate national as well as international economic strategies. Being technocrats themselves – even before that term came to be widely accepted - they rooted for the technocrat in high office and at the helm of nations. Herbert Hoover fit their bill perfectly. It is only surprising that with the Great Depression the enthusiasm for the technocratic statesman did not die out permanently. After two generations with the "Greedy Eighties" the politico-economic type came back to the fore. Let's hope that not the same vengeance ensues. But come to think of it, perhaps it is not surprising – after two generations the social, historical, and national memory has died out as a matter of course, for all but the most studious.

Veblen's signal achievement in all that gloom is the sociological analysis of what he called "conspicuous consumption", that is the behavioral pattern of certain if not most strata of society to consume not to satisfy a primal desire or need but to consume ostentatiously and as a status symbol.

He explains: "Leisure is honorable and becomes imperative partly because it shows exemption from ignoble labor. The archaic differentiation into noble and ignoble classes is based on the invidious distinction between employments as honorific or debasing..."[19]

He traces this kind of behavior back to pre-historic societies and the difference of the hunters and gatherers which in turn translates into predatory and peaceable behavior patterns. He further identifies the predatory largely with the male and the "peace-oriented" with the female. In less primal and more civilized societies which involve specialization and division of labor this "conspicuous consumption" becomes largely 'vicarious consumption' of dependants. The more conspicuous the consumption, the more futile and wasteful the more it conveys an elevated status to those who can afford it. In the end conspicuous consumption amounts to conspicuous waste. Both ecological and economic disasters can be traced back to this kind of non-intelligent primate behavior.

Veblen concludes: "No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretense of pecuniary decency is put away."[20]

Veblen's analysis is a decidedly two-edged sword. On one hand it is remarkable how he traces sociopathic behavior patterns of modern society which are ultimately destructive and even self-destructive to primate and Neanderthal rituals. Many charities, for instance, are rightfully exploded as pseudo-activities which really are but ostentations of leisure.

On the other hand his analysis viewed with the hindsight of more than a century burns down to the implicit condoning of male-chauvinist and social-Darwinist structures and processes of society which are all the more depressing as with the

[19] . Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class, 1899/1934, NYC, p. 92
[20] . Veblen, op. cit., p. 81

infinitely greater power of destruction modern-man-cum-Neanderthal-man has become not only a danger to his immediate peers, but a nuclear danger on a global scale.

An ethical pygmy may not be entrusted to gain dominion over a world other than in destroying it. No question: In a world according to Veblen man has not progressed in many millennia, nay, the very possibility of progress is gainsaid, and we are definitely back in the Platonic dungeon.

Let's see if the other giant of 20th Century Social Science Max Weber has anything in his work which may lift us out of this dismal dungeonic perspective.

Veblen declared conspicuous consumption to be a "higher or spiritual need". This kind of statement and this line of thinking should take the cake as far as philosophic fallacies in mundane thinking is concerned, in fact it should well be eligible if not be the front runner to take the whole cake bakery!

Max Weber's line of argument is different. In a pivotal passage he delineates the difference between Protestant and Catholic as well as more ancient attitudes:

"Now it is unmistakable that even in the German word *Beruf*, and perhaps still more clearly in the English *calling*, a religious conception, that of a task set by God, is at least suggested. ... if we trace the history of the word through the civilized languages, it appears that neither the predominantly Catholic peoples nor those of classical antiquity have possessed any expression of similar connotation for what we know as a calling (in the sense of a life-task, a definite field in which to work), while one has existed for all predominantly Protestant peoples. ... Like the meaning of the word, the idea is new, a product of the Reformation. ... one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This it was which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance, and which first created the conception of a calling in this sense."[21]

The German language even in its vernacular differentiates further into *Berufung*, which would be calling proper, and *Brotberuf*, which would be day job, or job-to-pay-one's-bills. The first having decidedly spiritual overtones and connotations, the latter having no such connotations whatsoever.

Weber specifies the contrast to the traditional attitude "The Old Testament ... showed no sign of a tendency to excel worldly morality ... Everyone should abide

[21] . Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1930/2005, NYC, p. 39-40

by his living and let the godless run after gain. ... Not until the Talmud is a partially, but not even then fundamentally, different attitude to be found. ... The element of radical repudiation of the world ... excluded the possibility that the modern idea of calling should be based on [Jesus Christ's] personal authority."[22]

We are returning to our earlier recognition that without the three-step of Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment with its corresponding crystallization of the individual against the typal, the spiritual dignification of the most "mundane labor", and the rational dispensation of the mists of superstition and obscurantism no science of Political Economy in its modern and post-modern sense would have been conceivable or even possibly feasible.

[22] . Weber, op. cit., p. 43