

to ascribe the bulk of such abuses to the state sector. Similarly, the authors seem to minimize the role of corruption. At the very end of the book, they allude to it in their discussion of “political capital,” but conclude that political capital does not confer advantages on a business that invests in seeking rents.

A final issue with Nee and Opper’s findings comes from the work of Yasheng Huang, who argues that while private entrepreneurship flourished in the 1980s, the state sector has since regained the upper hand, and that far from evolving toward a true market economy, China has become trapped in a deviant form he calls “Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics.” Nee and Opper’s conclusions are obviously very different and suggest that the private sector has the upper hand, thus ensuring that China will continue to push toward a more fully marketized economy. The contrast between Huang and the authors of *Capitalism from Below* thus forms the basis for a new round in the ongoing debate over the political economy of reform.

The Political Ideas of Thorstein Veblen. By Sidney Plotkin and Rick Tilman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 288p. \$30.00.
doi:10.1017/S153759271200343X

— Bob Pepperman Taylor, *University of Vermont*

Thorstein Veblen is among the least studied of the great Progressive era intellectuals, and this new contribution to Veblen studies should be warmly welcomed not only by specialists but by anyone interested in radical social and political thought, American political thought in general, and Progressive ideas in particular. The authors believe that Veblen’s writings “provide rich and untapped perspectives for radical critiques of politics” (p. 8), and they offer a sympathetic but critical and fair evaluation of his political thought. Both Sidney Plotkin and Rick Tilman are senior and highly regarded Veblen scholars; both have served terms as president of the International Thorstein Veblen Association.

The initial problem the authors face is establishing Veblen’s credentials as a political thinker. They note that he developed no conventional political science, nor was he a systematic political theorist. Although he supported radical causes and groups, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), he was generally disengaged both from conventional civic participation (he rarely voted) and from movement or protest politics. Indeed, he vigorously resisted demands that he make his scholarship politically useful, and as “far as political action is concerned, he has little or nothing to say” (p. 25).

What Veblen does offer, however, is a social theory with wide-ranging, powerful, and provocative political implications. Readers of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) will recall that he locates the motive for private ownership in “emulation,” an “invidious distinction” through which

status is expressed and power and domination are exercised. Veblen’s thought as a whole develops what we might think of as an anthropology of power, tracing the movement from egalitarian and industrious (and, interestingly, matriarchal) “savagery” to the birth of “barbarism,” in which inequality is invented and power wielded by unproductive individuals or classes in order to dominate and extract wealth from others. As Plotkin and Tilman suggest, “Veblen’s critical theory is fundamentally a narrative about the enduring habits, institutions, and costs of a barbaric adoration of power” (p. 14). Our civilization owes much more to such barbarism than we often admit or even recognize; indeed, our primary social, economic, and political institutions, he holds, are much more about domination and exploitation than about the equality, community, and democracy to which we claim to aspire. Veblen traces and uncovers the barbaric origins and purposes of practices and institutions we assume (or pretend) to be rational, utilitarian, and just. His claim is that the ancient struggle between “savagery” and “barbarism” is never fully escaped or transcended, that we are a long way from rationally and honestly understanding our institutions and ourselves.

Veblen is, of course, a relentless social critic: as the authors say, for Veblen a “central truth of power is its habit of deceit” (p. 32). He is also, for this reason, deeply pessimistic about political reform; we are shaped and channeled through ancient cultural dynamics of which we are only dimly aware. Plotkin and Tilman put it this way: “Veblen urges us toward an uncomfortable truth: we post-modern citizens of the information age live anthropologically in a darker past” (p. 6).

There is enough here to offend just about everyone, of course: Conservatives recoil at Veblen’s unremitting criticism of capitalism and our political institutions; liberals are repelled by his pessimism about “democratic” politics and reform; and radicals cannot abide his political disengagement and pessimism about political rebellion. While the authors identify critical weaknesses in Veblen’s views (such as his unwillingness to fully develop certain central ideas in his theory), they praise him for exposing the degree to which “contemporary political life is concerned with sentiments, values, habits, and institutions that long pre-date capitalism” (p. 202). Recognizing this, they believe, allows us to gain insights from Veblen that are often missed or obscured by other radical thinkers. There is an underlying anarchism here, growing from the grand narrative of the subversion of an attractive and natural savagery by the brutality of barbarism. (Vestiges of this older savagery can still be found in artisanal and working communities of the economically and politically powerless, which explains Veblen’s attraction to the IWW.) There is also, however, a deep skepticism about the prospects for establishing, or reestablishing, a world devoid of “barbaric” power.

There is an air of apology throughout the book’s opening chapters, with the authors working mightily to defend

their choice of topic. The real defense of this choice, however, is found in the rich and stimulating analysis of Veblen's political thought, beginning with Chapter 4, and the authors have every reason to be confident in letting that analysis speak for itself. Some readers may wish to skip directly from the first (introductory) to the fourth chapter, leaving Chapters 2 and 3 for later.

Substantively, readers should beware that this study does not attempt to locate Veblen's ideas within the context of Progressive America. The authors embed Veblen's work within the canonical nineteenth-century European sociological and radical traditions (e.g., Marx, Weber) and twentieth-century radical theory (e.g., the Frankfurt School, Foucault). Specialists in American political thought have no general grounds for objecting if Plotkin and Tilman believe that Veblen's thought is best illuminated in this broader sociological and radical tradition, of course, even if they would like to know more about his intellectual relationship with such obvious figures as John Dewey (whose career intersected with Veblen's at a number of points; Tilman has written about this in the past). However, there is reason to think that at a number of critical moments in their analysis, the authors would have been less prone to find Veblen's ideas quite as unique as they do had they been thinking more in terms of the debates from Veblen's own American context. The preoccupation with anthropology, evolutionary naturalism, the limits and potential of constitutional thinking, the devastating critique of war and the state—these (and more) themes from Veblen's thought all echo forcefully throughout the American intellectual world of his lifetime. It is not simply that specialists in American political thought might like to focus on topics of lesser interest to Plotkin and Tilman. It is, rather, that the likes of Dewey, Franz Boas, and Randolph Bourne may be just as important for understanding and evaluating Veblen's political ideas as are Marx, Weber, and Gramsci.

Plotkin and Tilman rightly point out the frustration that so many "engaged" intellectuals have with Veblen's refusal to politicize his scholarship, and they discuss in detail his understanding of noninstrumental "science" (that is, scholarship). More could fruitfully be said, however, about the degree to which Veblen's scholarly ideals set him deeply at odds with the reformist intellectual and educational commitments of his generation. While Dewey struggled mightily to "reconstruct" intellectual life as a powerful and effective democratic weapon, and is widely praised and admired for doing so, Veblen insisted that what he called "idle curiosity" is the only legitimate value for a civilized, modern academy. This places him squarely at odds with all activist and politicized intellectuals. In this sense, one of Veblen's most powerful, enduring political ideas is a negative one, as he insists on the need to keep our scholarly life as far as possible from what he views as the inevitable corruptions of (even aspiring to and reform-

ing) political power. This commitment alone distinguishes Veblen's intellectual radicalism and serves as a significant challenge to much liberal, "progressive," and radical political thought.

This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly. By Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 512p. \$35.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592712003441

— Anil Hira, *Simon Fraser University*

Where have all the relevant political economists gone? While political scientists in general have enjoyed a great deal of attention during this election season and in regard to the tumult around the Middle East, it seems hard to find a fellow political scientist in the public spotlight who can speak about perhaps the most important issue of all, the continuing economic crisis in the West since 2008. The best-known voice on this issue, *New York Times* columnist and Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman, is known for pointing out the insufficiencies of the stimulus program. In this book, economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff take a much-needed longer view, placing the current crisis, with a focus on the U.S. housing bubble, into historical perspective. The main theme of their book, as revealed by the title, is that there is a common tendency in the midst of asset and/or financial bubbles to miss obvious (in hindsight, anyway) indicators of overvaluation.

It is risky to try to find fault with a book that is lauded by other well-known economists and financial analysts as "a masterpiece." However, from a political science perspective, the book reveals a genuine missed opportunity for us to make a contribution to this debate, namely in better understanding the policies behind, and in reaction to, the crisis. Reinhart and Rogoff's most important contribution is the development of an historical database of all financial crises that goes back to the nineteenth century. This painstaking effort allows them to examine patterns across crises, documenting observations that are not particularly novel in some cases but important for realizing their them as reflected in the title. En route, they examine crises from a number of angles, from sovereign debt crises to domestic debt defaults to banking and currency crashes. They end with an analysis of the U.S. subprime crisis and some general lessons.

Each section contains an interesting analysis based on the original data set. However, beyond the overall theme, it is hard at times to follow a train of logic from one section to another. The different sections seem to reveal instead the multifaceted nature and sources of debt crises, such as the difficulty in separating domestic from external shocks. In this sense, one could argue that it is important to condition the historical analysis more strongly than the authors do here. First, there is the question about whether