

Stephen Edgell, *Veblen in Perspective: His Life and Thought* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001) pp. xiii, 209, \$22.95. ISBN 1-56324-117-X.

This book must be considered a masterpiece of scholarship. Edgell has presented a perspective on Thorstein Veblen and his work that summarizes, refines, and details virtually all that has preceded the publication of this title. It is a relatively brief volume that is eminently readable and thoroughly researched. The style and flow are accessible to all readers, although this is clearly a piece of scholarship that is targeted to those who are already Veblen-literate. If the reader wants to know who has written about Veblen (1857–1929) in the last century and, moreover, wishes to know what has been said about this iconoclast of capitalism and founding figure of institutional economics, then Edgell's book is a user-friendly guide to the twentieth century's "who's who" list of Veblen scholars. Edgell has combed the Veblen turf, and if there are unturned stones, most of us wouldn't be qualified enough to know otherwise. I counted the number of reference entries at the book's end and calculated about 350 of them. Although I wouldn't say for sure, it struck me that he actually cited all of them more than once. If one were to pick a random page from the text, there would likely be at least a dozen citations on it.

Stephen Edgell is Professor of Sociology at the University of Salford in England. He has been studying Veblen for three decades, and with this book he suggests in the Preface that his perspective is different, in part, because he is British. Accordingly, as he says, over the years "I became aware that often I was the only Veblen buff from Britain who was engaged in a regular way with the latest Veblen scholarship and that my perspective on Veblen was different from the perspectives of my American colleagues" (p. x).

The book's purpose? Edgell states that it is to "provide a more rounded account of his life *and* work, both with reference to an Anglo-European perspective on Veblen (the first from a British academic since Hobson's short book was published in 1936)" (p. xi). What would an Anglo-European perspective on Veblen suggest? That's less clear when the reader finishes this volume. But loosely considered, one is left with a view that Veblen was more of a Darwinian evolutionist than what we always thought, that Veblen was less goofy and alienated than what Joseph Dorfman thought, and that Veblen was more of a Gramscian critical theorist than what most neo- and post-Marxists have thought. Does he prove all of this? If you are not convinced, you will still be impressed with the scholarly effort.

In many respects this is a book about what might be labeled "The Veblen Controversies." It does not offer a unique or novel interpretation of Veblen's life and works. It's not a book that should be considered an introduction or survey of Veblenian ideas. This is not a book for those who don't already know Veblen or haven't previously read his works. It's not for the beginner. And for that matter, it's not a "guide to Veblen" that one might use as supplemental reading in a Veblen course. But for the serious Veblen scholar, and the scholar who knows something about the controversies that have surrounded this legendary figure, there are a variety of insights that deepen and enrich our understanding of his life and ideas. Readers need to be fluent in Veblenian categories: predatory vs. workmanship, business vs. industry, instinct theory, status emulation,

conspicuous consumption, the role of engineers, technology, and imbecile institutions, pecuniary prowess, etc. And it helps to know what the “controversies” are. Was he a marginalized and alienated womanizer? Was he a technological determinist? Was he a Darwinian teleologist? A techno elitist? Or a techno utopian? These are the controversies about who Veblen was and what he actually meant that are addressed by Edgell. Of course, to dispute Edgell’s perspective one would have to be up to speed on all of the research that’s been published about Veblen over the past century. Many of us are accustomed to using Veblen’s ideas, some of his books, like *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, and working within his paradigm. We find him relevant and engaging and want to turn our students on to him. But the extent to which we are literate about the controversies is another matter. This is the perfect book to find out more about them.

For example, the conventional wisdom about Veblen’s personal life is that it was troubled, alienated, and marginalized. Much of this conclusion has been the offspring of Joseph Dorfman’s biography of Veblen published in 1934. Of course, this has been considered the authoritative Veblen biography for the last seventy years, even though it may not be. But it was Dorfman who, as Edgell suggests, is largely responsible for what has been termed the “Man from Mars” case of mistaken marginality. At least it is Edgell’s argument that this is a “mistaken marginality” (pp. 30–31). As Edgell states, “The ‘stranger’ theme was picked up, expanded upon, and transformed into a pernicious alienated ‘outsider’ thesis by one of Johnson’s and Mitchell’s graduate students, Joseph Dorfman (1904–91) in the first and most influential biography of Veblen during the twentieth century” (p. 31). But Dorfman was in his early twenties when he interviewed Veblen, and this he did only twice. Clearly, his take on Veblen was influenced by a variety of factors that ultimately shaped and biased our notion of Veblen’s apparent estrangement. Edgell concludes, after presenting what has been the most documented contrary evidence imaginable, that “Dorfman’s perception of Veblen was not only impaired by faulty lenses from the outset but that it may tell us more about the author than it does about the victim, more about the seeking of conventional academic success and social acceptability than it does about the origins of Veblen’s acclaimed critical social thought” (pp. 54–55). I found Edgell’s argument convincing—Veblen was no doubt a lot less alienated than I ever realized. An additional thought to which Edgell alludes but doesn’t develop (because it’s not within the purview of his project) is that our mistaken alienation myth has possibly hindered a wider acceptance of Veblen’s social theory (p. 55). This would be a hard case to prove, but if true, it would mean that *Veblen in Perspective* might contribute to the future of Veblenian ideas.

But this is only one of the controversies that Edgell seeks to correct. Edgell examines the existing research that shaped Veblen’s evolutionary theory. Was Veblen’s evolutionism teleological or not? After considerable documentation of the influence of Spencer, Lamarck, and Darwin, Edgell concludes, “What Veblen objected to therefore, was not teleology per se, but the determinism involved in limiting all economic action to one historical social construction, the ‘rationalistic, teleological terms of calculation and choice’” (p. 71). Again, through extensive documentation, Edgell concurs with our widely held view today that for Veblen the “direction of change is indeterminate” (p. 79).

Edgell also has a chapter on *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He concludes “any doubts that may be harbored regarding the interpretive value of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* following consideration of the relevant research on this topic could be dispelled by visiting the midwestern United States and observing that the front lawn is still essentially a pasture” (p. 109). And from my experience living in northern Arizona, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is even more relevant when one realizes that the Midwestern lawn has been literally transplanted to Phoenix.

But of the controversies that Edgell examines, the relevance of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is clearly less at issue than whether or not Veblen thought engineers were going to usher in the next revolution. And if they did, so this controversy goes, wouldn't they constitute a new ruling class? *Veblen in Perspective* concludes with a discussion of the instinct of workmanship, how it might come to be appreciated by engineers, and what this implies in Veblen's *The Engineers and the Price System* (*EPS*, 1921). Edgell maintains that “Veblen viewed the prospect of technologists' starting a revolution as ‘quite chimerical,’” and “to claim otherwise involves a distortion of Veblen's analysis” (p. 141). Likewise, what about the controversy regarding the “soviet of technicians”? Edgell rejects the criticism that Veblen was a techno elitist, arguing instead that Veblen's favorable view of soviets resulted from Trotsky's concept of them as “authentic democracy” practiced from the shop floor upward by the rank-and-file. Finally, Edgell concedes that, as many have suggested, Veblen had a strong utopian bent to his thought. In fact, says Edgell, to really appreciate *The Engineers and the Price System* it is “helpful to consider *EPS* from the relatively neglected perspective of Veblen's utopianism” (p. 156).

The Veblen controversies, and the nuances that surround them, are the heart of Edgell's excellent piece of research and scholarship. This book is for those who wonder about who Veblen really was and question what his successors have said about him and about his theories. *Veblen in Perspective* would make a nice supplement to a graduate class on Veblen. It is a recommended read for all Veblen archivists and scholars. Ultimately if we want to advance and spread Veblen's message to as many folks as possible, then we welcome books such as this one.

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REFERENCE

Dorfman, Joseph. 1934. *Thorstein Veblen and His America*. New York: Viking, 1966.

Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi, eds., *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999) pp.xi, 426, \$55. ISBN 0-262-07193-2

In this collection of thirteen articles, there are two that I think will be of direct interest to economic historians. Katharine Park's piece, “Natural Particulars: