Book Review


Of scholars dealing with ideas advanced by Thorstein Veblen, and the rich legacy these offer us, Rick Tilman registers as among the finest of the finest. Integral to his contributions as a Veblen scholar, I can readily note about seven books that focus upon and help to clarify Veblen’s legacy. Bearing titles as Emeritus Professor of Public Administration at the University of Las Vegas, Nevada, and Adjunct Professor in History at Northern Arizona University, he also remains organizationally engaged. With its inception and ever since, Tilman has held close connections with the “International Thorstein Veblen Association,” founded in 1992 by the late Arthur Vidich, who long held a professorship in the Department of Sociology at the New School for Social Research—a school that Veblen helped to found and where he taught for few years.

With his penchant for artful, self-deprecating humor, the last time I heard this “Veblenian voice from the desert,” he had the floor and commenced with agitating his colleagues held captive by circumstance associated with at an AFTT meeting in Salt Lake City. With wryness, Professor Tilman got us chewing on the idea that this “association” of “internationalists” and “Veblenians” could boast over 25 members worldwide. Getting deeper into his attitude, and moving from self-deprecation to full blown pride, Rick Tilman emphasized that 25 solid members indeed represented a substantial quantity. His bold statement went unchallenged, and he has left me pondering its significance ever since: thinking that—by gum—25 dedicated Veblen scholars scattered across our globe do indeed register as a formidable intellectual force, offering strong beacons of light for a Western civilization cut adrift and lost at sea.

Consisting of 15 chapters, most of which have been published as journal articles, this recent title reflects Professor Tilman’s seriousness and also his earnestness in relating Veblen to key thinkers who could be registered as his
contemporaries in or from Europe. As the substance of Chapter 14, Tilman goes a step further and also considers how selected European societies received Veblen and his ideas, especially the British, French, and Italians. Content in other chapters examines Veblen’s connections with selected thinkers, relying upon use of an approach that places Europeans against the backdrop of their respective nationalities. For example, when considering German thinkers—as these can be related to Veblen—he juxtaposes Veblen to Germany’s Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, and then to members of the Frankfurt School which include Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. Institutions specific to Germany at relevant points in time are noted to bear upon these social scientists he considers in depth. Noting such thinkers and schools of thought against their national contexts, Tilman offers us a well conceived and well researched intellectual history that skillfully integrates and also locates Veblen and his contributions to social science thought at intersections of crucial nexuses.

Tilman considers Veblen’s European contemporaries in a variety of relationships. For example, there were those like German immigrant Jacques Loeb, whom Veblen held as a dear and personal friend when both were on the faculty at the University of Chicago. For contrasts, Tilman introduces others who shared little more than the two were engaged in social science inquiry, happened to live on the same earth, and with life spans that overlapped at least a little bit. Here, John Neville Keynes comes to mind. There is also his son, John Maynard. Tilman stresses that in all of their publications, not one of Veblen’s contributions is cited by the Keynes duo. But, moving in the other direction, Tilman keenly notes that Veblen knew the writings of both John Neville and John Maynard, and clearly offered penetrating insights into the latter’s Economic Consequences of the Peace (1919), so penetrating that his review continues on as one of the most frequently read and cited book reviews in the history of the Economics profession.

Then, there are the playwrights George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen, who, like Veblen, considered positions of women in their societies. So, one could summarize, noting that the well-read Veblen, known for many strengths—including his background in philology—had certainly digested the writings and thoughts of his European contemporaries, and much more so than they his. With this juxtaposition to so many European thinkers, Tilman stresses that the Englishman John Hobson, author of several thought-provoking books, including his enduring Imperialism: A Study (1902), shared more commonality with Veblen than with all the others.

Before reading this book I had never thought to relate contributions of the likes of Vilfredo Pareto to Veblen and his writings. Indeed, this juxtaposition offers a study in contrasts. However, the contrasts that Tilman offers assist us in understanding two very different human beings in two very different national
contexts, who were then engaged in fundamentally different projects. There is Veblen, the egalitarian, hoping to make everyone better off. And then there is ole Pareto—the diehard elitist—the aristocrat wholly unwilling to make anyone better off if this would make him worse off.

Prior to considering this book, my knowledge of Werner Sombart and his contributions was hardly extant. Noting Sombart as a latter day exponent of the jüngste German Historical School, Tilman explores the interaction of institutions native to Germany which provided the setting that contributed toward Sombart weighing in as an intellectual supporter of the National Socialist’s project.

My reading suggests that Professor Tilman has written this book with the well read in mind. Or, it could also serve those who would digest the contents of this book in order to join the ranks of the well read. This is a highbrow read and one that I found most appealing and enlightening. With this book, Tilman explores areas and topics that I had never thought were important for increasing our understanding of Veblen, his life, and the richness of his legacy. Aside from individuals seeking advanced edification, on a more practical note, this book would prove useful in a course dealing with the place of an American thinker in the larger constellation of European Intellectual History. I could recommend that any and all considering the significance of Thorstein Veblen’s legacy to social science thought to read and also ponder the contents of this book that Professor Tilman so skillfully introduces for his readers to consider.

John Hall
Portland State University
© 2013 John Hall
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2013.819267