

## BOOK REVIEW

# Camic: Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics

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*Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics* (2020) by the sociologist Charles Camic, is a big book with 363 pages of text proper, 112 pages of end notes and 13 pages of index. Veblen is well known among economists for his work on conspicuous consumption, which mainstream economics textbooks regard as an anomaly. In *Veblen*, Camic undertakes an "historical study of the connection between Thorstein Veblen's economic ideas... and how he was born and bred intellectually" (2020:2). In the process, Camic successfully captures Veblen's sociological and historical approach to economics: very unlike contemporary marginalist economics.

Veblen studied at Carleton, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Cornell and Chicago (Camic, 2020:3). After obtaining a PhD in philosophy, Veblen, at age 34, decides to do a second PhD—in political economy (2020:212, 215). Veblen's first book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, was completed in September 1898 (2020:298), and the second, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, in February 1904 (2020:321). In 1901, when Veblen submitted the manuscript of his second book, then titled 'The Captain of Industry and His Work' to Macmillan, it was rejected (2020:322). Camic conjectures that the elimination of the "leisure class" from his subsequent writings "perhaps explains why later commentators on Veblen, captivated by his earlier ideas about the leisure class, have been fairly indifferent to these later writings" (2020:326). Veblen frequently suffered financial hardship, applying for fellowships and taking loans (2020:217). Camic tells us that much like Keynes, Veblen "took part" in the Political Economy Club (2020:263) but offers little more information on this. A brief account of the club's activities would have been insightful.

Camic's main argument is that Veblen's economic ideas can be fully explained by studying his intellectual milieu, something to which biographers pay insufficient attention. In doing so, Camic successfully repudiates the dominant interpretation of Veblen as an intellectual "outsider", first advanced in Joseph Dorfman's 1934 biography. Of interest to those of us in a department of economics, is the origin of Dorfman's biography. Dorfman's mentors at Columbia University "encouraged him to write as his dissertation an intellectual biography of Thorstein Veblen" (2020:43). In departments of economics today, unfortunately, it is unlikely for there to be any encouragement for this type of thesis.

Dorfman's "Veblen-as-an-outsider thesis" was carried forward by economists like Galbraith and Heilbroner, both of whom have written popular books on the history of economic thought (2020:5, 44). In Camic's account, "...Veblen emerges as the consummate academic insider" (2020:291). As Camic puts it, "Thorstein Veblen knew the field of economics inside out because he was involved in it from the inside, not looking down on it from Olympus as a detached spectator or iconoclastic outsider" (2020:290). Similarly, Veblen is said to have been "an experienced insider to the academic world of his time" (2020:50).

This review essay is divided into eight sections followed by a conclusion. The sections deal with the following themes respectively: Camic's standpoint; Veblen's intellectual milieu; his approach; his teachers; forgotten aspects of classical political economy; Veblen's critique of marginalism; his theory of value and distribution; and his problematic reading of the history of economic thought.

### CAMIC'S STANDPOINT

Camic is, in his own words, an "historically oriented sociologist of knowledge", whose "research interests have always been in the relationship between lives and ideas" (2020:15). Consequently, his sources are wide ranging; his archival sources include the Veblen papers housed at Carleton, Cornell, Chicago and Yale, the Clark papers at Columbia, the Ely papers at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, among many others (2020:18–23). There is an insightful discussion of knowledge production where he defines a 'field'—a sociology of knowledge (2020:31). Camic is dissatisfied with mainstream biographies because of the lack of attention given to time. According to Camic, "...capturing temporality requires the sociological study of biography..." (2020:34). In line with this, Camic provides mini biographies of Veblen's teachers throughout the book.

Most biographical accounts, notes Camic, do not pay attention to *how* the individual entered academia (or the intellectual world) and *how* they innovated there (2020:35). In particular, there is a tendency "to abbreviate the education of these figures almost to the vanishing point" (2020:35). In a biography I recently reviewed—Patel's *Naoroji*—some attention is given to his educational experience in the first chapter (Thomas 2021a). However, I must admit to having wondered about the precise nature of the education in economics imparted to Naoroji at Elphinstone College and to the British civil servants (of colonial India) in Balliol College.

Camic identifies two kinds of standard biographical narratives. However, these narratives fall short because "the biographer superimposes his or her [or their] story line onto the historical evidence without taking sufficient account of the temporality of life" (2020:38). Camic is correct in highlighting that "knowledge production is a process that happens in time and hinges on time" (2020:39), and takes this point a little further by pointing out that an innovative idea arises from "a temporal snowball that gathers force with each successive repetition". As such, it is important to examine the "repetition of knowledge practices" in the life of innovative economists (2020:40).

In the book, Camic takes up a defensive position when he defines originality as a contemporaneous and not an historical question:

"Here and throughout the book, when I myself speak of someone as 'original' or 'innovative,' I am situating the person's work in a particular historical context. What is original by this metric is what informed contemporaries see as a new addition—whether theory, concept, argument, bundle of information, or whatever—to a historically specific conversation. I realize that there are other—more transhistorical, but defensible—metrics of originality" (2020:365, n2).

When originality is understood in this manner, there is a potential problem—what is original depends on the orthodoxy or the mainstream. And, in the presence of competing paradigms of economic thought, originality becomes narrowly understood in relation to the dominant paradigm.

Camic interprets the ‘political’ in political economy in the mainstream way—as ‘policy’—and therefore as providing “advice for legislators and other elites about policy issues such as free trade, tariffs, currency reform, and so forth” (2020:115). This is a conceptually poor way to understand political economy because for the classical political economists, ‘political’ meant the following: (i) the social surplus is utilized according to the needs and aspirations of the people, (ii) wages are determined by historical and cultural arrangements, and (iii) structures of power are analytically significant.

## II VEBLEN’S INTELLECTUAL MILIEU

Camic ably situates Veblen’s ideas within the contemporaneous economic thought. A “glossary on economic schools” is provided by Camic (2020:127–32). The two schools of thought prominent during Veblen’s education were classical political economy and the German Historical School. The first, as Camic notes, went by many names: “Old school”, “deductive school” and “orthodox school” (2020:127–8) and the second too: “Younger School”, “inductive school”, “new school” and “historical school” (2020:129). Economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and J.S. Mill belonged to the first school and Karl Knies and Gustav Schmoller to the second (2020:130). It must be noted that, as Camic writes, Mill was the face of classical political economy, for Mill’s *Principles* (1848) “remained the most widely read book on the subject for decades” (2020:128–9). In a similar fashion, the evolutionary ideas of Herbert Spencer “quietly made their way into America’s educational institutions, infiltrating high schools and colleges through new or revised textbooks...” (2020:95).

The “Austrian school” arrived in the US in the late 1880s and early 1890s with the work of Carl Menger, Eugen Böhm-Bawerk and Friedrich Wieser. This school, a branch of the “marginal utility school” or “marginalism”, was seen as making a “departure from both leading economic schools” (2020:131). Marginalism appears in the intellectual landscape vividly only in the 1870s with the pioneering work of Leon Walras, W.S. Jevons and Carl Menger. And during Veblen’s time, the marginal productivity theory of income distribution was on its way to dominance; its “leading American exponent” (2020:11), John Bates Clark, who was Veblen’s teacher (at Carleton), asserted that people get what they contribute. According to Camic, the success of “the marginal utility theory of value” partly owes to the various methodological criticisms faced by classical economics and the empirical fervor and concomitant theoretical poverty visible in “German historicism” (2020:283).

Veblen’s thought, Camic argues, can be better understood by noting the “four features of the turbulent American economy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century” (2020:186). These are a “huge expansion in industrial production”, “the emergence of the corporation” (including the “creation of the investment banks”), “consumerism”, and “economically inspired protest”. Indeed, all these themes are visible in Veblen’s body of work.

## VEBLEN’S APPROACH

Camic identifies three methodological principles in Veblen: (i) the economy as an historical entity that changes and evolves; (ii) methodological holism, which locates the individual within the social; and (iii) distinguishing activities as productive and non-productive from a social, not economic, standpoint (2020:46). As Camic convincingly demonstrates, Veblen was extremely familiar with

these ways of seeing and thinking, mainly owing to his teachers who emphasized historical thinking, holism, and “valorizing work over idleness” (2020:100).

Overall, like many other writers of his time, Veblen’s thought “was an amalgam of philosophical premises, ethical presuppositions, political and social commentaries, historical and ethnological information, and views on a wide range of biological, psychological, sociological, and economic subjects” (2020:45).

Wesley Mitchell “credited Veblen with ‘blending historical research and theory more perfectly’ than any previous figure in the history of economics” (2020:14). The exaggeration is perhaps understandable given that Mitchell was “Veblen’s student and close friend...” (2020:175). Using Veblen’s book reviews (from mid-1893 onward) as an archive, Camic argues that they already indicate the presence of “institutionalist-evolutionary ways of thinking” (2020:268). Essentially, “institutional-evolutionary” implies the first two methodological principles outlined above (also see 2020:250). As an institutionalist, Veblen “upheld holism against atomism” (2020:361). As an evolutionist, Veblen upheld historicity.

It is refreshing to read that economic thinking in America during Veblen’s time was pluralist and therefore open to his critiques and alternatives:

“This is not to say that the newcomers opposed Veblen’s assault on atomistic and ahistorical economic thinking or his agenda to study the evolution of economic institutions. Some economists still found Veblen’s agenda compelling, while others did not; American economics of this era was pluralistic in outlook. In 1918 economists sympathetic to Veblen’s program launched ‘institutional economics’ as a reform movement within the discipline, and the movement continued strong until after World War II” (Camic 2020:356).

Such openness is perhaps not all that surprising because the professionalization of economics had only just begun at that time.

## **VEBLEN’S TEACHERS**

Camic’s biography of Veblen is very much an intellectual biography of his teachers. And as a detailed picture of Veblen’s education, it is an important pillar of Camic’s knowledge-as-repetition thesis. In my review, I shall focus only on four of his teachers—John Bates Clark, Richard T. Ely, William Graham Sumner and James L. Laughlin.

### **CLARK**

Clark taught political economy and “half-dozen different courses” to Veblen at Carleton (Camic 2020:114). This was in the late 1870s when Clark had not yet taken up the marginalist mantle fully. In any case, Veblen “had received a little foretaste of marginalist thinking” (2020:227). It is important to note that Clark exposed Veblen to classical economics through Henry Fawcett’s *Manual of Political Economy* and J.S. Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (2020:116–7). Fawcett’s book aligned classical political economy with “laissez-faire doctrines opposed to government intervention into the economy”; the popular books that did this “found a substantial readership” (2020:128). And the utilitarian underpinnings of Mill are well known. Camic motivates the readers in his chapter on Veblen’s childhood by calling him a “future critic of classical and marginalist economic theories that rested on atomistic premises” (2020:57). Given that classical economists like Smith and Ricardo

adopted methodological holism, such an interpretation by Camic is odd. Perhaps Camic's reading of Smith and Ricardo is also through the distorted lenses of Faucett and Mill.

Clark (and consequently Veblen) was exposed to the German Historical School because "he had studied with Karl Knies, one of the school's founders" in the period when Clark was a graduate student at Heidelberg (2020:117). Knies criticized classical political economy for assuming a self-interested person, methodological individualism, and for being asocial and ahistorical. It is extremely difficult to reconcile this interpretation of classical political economy with the writings of Smith and Ricardo. Perhaps, inspired by the German Historical School, Clark suggested that political economy "be built on a permanent foundation of anthropological fact" (2020:118). This is the same Clark who would later develop the marginal productivity theory of income distribution; nothing could be farther from anthropological fact because income distribution is exogenously determined by policies and politics and not endogenously by marginal products.

### ELY

Veblen took a course on the 'History of Political Economy' with Ely at Johns Hopkins, who had also studied with Knies (2020:144). Ely had a "deep interest in the historical evolution of economic life-forms" (2020:145). With others at Hopkins, Ely cultivated "historical institutionalism" (2020:154); in 1884, the university published a monograph titled *Institutions and Economics* (2020:154–5), an early work on institutional economics. Veblen also "received his first systematic introduction to the subject of socialism" in Ely's course (2020:148).

"In course lectures, Ely examined the doctrines of Adam Smith (and his predecessors and successors) through the lens of an invidious contrast between classical economics and historical economics. Channeling his teacher Karl Knies, Ely's account reproached Smith and his accomplices for making 'universal self-interest the preponderating cause of economic phenomena,' eliding motives such as 'generosity, love of mankind, a desire to see those about one happy, pride, sentiment, etc.'" (2020:147).

In the above passage, we again come across a distorted view of Smith and other classical political economists because classical economists like Smith and Ricardo underscored the role of power, especially ranks and social classes in society, as an important driver of economic phenomena (similar criticisms had already been made by Clark at Carleton). It would have been helpful for Camic's readers to see how he reconciles such views with that of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* wherein social sentiments such as duty, justice and sympathy are explored. The social aspects of classical economics remain forgotten; for instance, their view of wages as being determined by history and culture has strong anthropological bearings.

"Wealth," Ely stated, "has a dangerous tendency to accumulate ... in accordance to [property] inheritance, privilege, and class," rather than "in proportion to useful intellectual and physical labor performed" (Camic 2020:149). Camic tells us that Henry George's 1879 book *Progress and Poverty* was "one of Ely's favourite texts" (2020:152). As Ely put it, "America has been ... *the land of the unearned increment*" (2020:152). This idea would later become central to Veblen's economic thought.

### SUMNER

While at Yale, Sumner taught Veblen “political economy, offering two graduate-level courses on the subject each year, which he taught using lectures and recitations (still a favorite teaching method, even with graduate students)” (Camic 2020:161). Like Clark and Ely, Sumner was influenced by German historicism. For Sumner, this occurred when he went “abroad to study ancient languages, history, and theology for three years, during which time he came under the influence of biblical scholars from the German historical school” (2020:161). However, Sumner “regarded himself as an orthodox economist in the tradition of the English school”; teaching with the use of “the standard textbooks of classical economics” (2020:162). It is extremely likely that Sumner’s understanding of classical economics was *also* based on the textbooks by Mill and Fawcett, both of which espoused methodological individualism and laissez faire. This is highly plausible because Camic informs us that “Sumner’s analysis of the financial history of the United States had an ulterior purpose: to lend scientific credence to the doctrine of laissez-faire” (2020:164).

### LAUGHLIN

The presence of Laughlin was an important reason for Veblen to attend Cornell (Camic 2020:222). Laughlin “was widely known for authoring two Older School textbooks and for his abridgment of the bible of classical economics, John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*, which he brought out in many revised editions, heavily annotating them to keep the gospel up-to-date” (2020:223). Yet again, we see how Mill became the spokesperson for classical economics.

According to Laughlin, “land, labor, and capital (which he took pains to define and parse into categories) are the universal “requisites of production,” the “three factors [that] enter into ... the production of anything we see about us.” Moreover, all three material factors operate according to scientific “laws” of increase; these laws determine the quantity of each factor and account for the differential economic returns that accrue to landowners as rent, to laborers as wages, and to capitalists as profit” (2020:224). Such a view of classical economics is clearly alien to the ideas of exogenous wages and distributive conflict found in Smith and Ricardo. The classical economists’ use of ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, as Laughlin rightly notes, are descriptive terms and not stamps of approval (2020:224). It is indeed the same with productive and unproductive labour.

Veblen’s teachers, writes Camic, “opted for the role and the style of the controversialist, seeing themselves as rebels fighting in opposition to error and cant, raining down skepticism, even heresy, on citadels of misguided and dangerous ideas” (2020:177). Veblen would also adopt this style in his writings. Moreover, Veblen viewed his classroom as a place where ideas were to be contested (2020:294).

From the intellectual portraits of Veblen’s teachers, it is clear that Veblen “combined the extended repetition of... [their] knowledge practices with multiple variations on those practices” (2020:178). Unfortunately Camic labours this point, repeating his knowledge-as-repetition thesis ad nauseam (for some instances, see 2020:177, 179, 180, 205).

Another experience which stands out, at least through the lens of today, is pluralism. Veblen’s educational experience was pluralistic; he “studied with professors in different disciplines: philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology, as well as economics” (2020:362). Moreover, one of his reasons to attend Cornell was, as Veblen wrote to his brother, “to hear and get in touch with men of different views from his own and different from his former teachers” (2020:222). That is, he preferred pluralism within economics too.

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## CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY: FORGOTTEN ASPECTS

As I have already noted above, Veblen's reading of classical economics was distorted by that of Fawcett and Mill. Although Camic defends his decision not to critically evaluate Veblen's teachers' understandings of classical economics early on in the book (owing to Camic's definition of originality, which we discussed in Section I), I believe an examination of Veblen's economic thought warrants a more critical account.

At several points in the book, Camic highlights Veblen's approval of methodological holism, his social standpoint, and his commitment to historical reasoning (as opposed to a tendency to universalize, visible in the works of many other economists). Quoting John Dewey (a contemporary of Veblen's at Hopkins), Camic writes that "'interests ... are social in their very nature.' Consequently, understanding them demands 'a more organic view of the individual and of society than is logically possible' on the basis of utilitarian and hedonistic conceptions about action" (2020:248). A few pages later, Camic cites Frederick Starr, the comparative ethnologist and a good friend of Veblen, to argue that "body coverings" or "dress" is social (2020:250–1). Such a social standpoint is explicit in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and, surprisingly, nowhere does Camic engage with this. Moreover, such a sociological viewpoint is present in Smith's *Wealth of Nations* when he discusses ranks (for a detailed account, see Thomas 2021b). Similarly, when Camic discusses "benevolence" and "parental affection" (2020:105), it is difficult not to recall Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* where sympathy, benevolence, affection and other moral sentiments are discussed.

In the July 1892 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, which was co-founded by Laughlin while at Harvard (2020:232), Veblen published an article titled 'The Overproduction Fallacy'. Following in the intellectual footsteps of Mill (and Laughlin), Veblen argued that:

"the notion of 'general' overproduction is 'palpably absurd'; inasmuch as commodity overproduction occurs, it is a 'particular' dislocation due to short-term industrial disruptions that eventually right themselves through a normal process of 'readjustment'" (2020:235).

It would have been pertinent had Camic highlighted that Sismondi and Malthus, both classical economists, had already argued about the possibility of an overproduction crisis.

By equating Mill's ideas with those of the classical economists, Camic writes that "wages were determined by the size of the 'wage fund' that capitalists maintained to cover labor costs..." (2020:284). Such a view of wages, Stirati (1994) has ably demonstrated, is alien to both Smith and Ricardo. Overall, these point towards a less-than-satisfactory understanding of classical political economy in Camic's book.

## VEBLEN'S CRITIQUE OF MARGINALISM

Although Veblen launched "a mild attack on the wage-fund theory that had just appeared in a book by Eugen Böhm-Bawerk, whom economists of the time regarded as 'the foremost champion of the Austrian School' of marginal utility theory" (Camic 2020:234), his main adversary was Clark and his marginal productivity theory of income distribution (2020:358). According to Clark, under conditions of competition, "We get what we produce—such is the dominant rule of life" (2020:359). Or, in other words, "income shares are legitimate 'rewards' to workers and capitalists alike for their differential "contributions" to the production of economic goods" (2020:286). As Camic puts it unequivocally, "Clark's productivity thesis constituted a strong defense of the economic status quo; he used his notion that capitalists and workers 'get what they produce' explicitly to assail the

‘socialist,’ ‘revolutionist’ contention that ‘the laboring classes ... are regularly robbed of what they produce’” (2020:287). The marginal productivity theory of income distribution continues to perform that political role—defending the “economic status quo”.

Veblen criticized the marginal productivity theory for being blind to “empirical facts” (2020:294), marginalists for being “blind” (2020:297), and asserted “that marginalist theory was ‘a consistent and comprehensive failure’” (2020:320). According to Camic, Veblen’s “judgment was corroborated by research he had recently completed in his ongoing effort to develop his own nonproductivity theory of distribution” (2020:320).

## **VII: VEBLEN’S THEORY OF VALUE AND DISTRIBUTION**

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen attacks the marginalist theory of value in the early chapters (2020:300). So, for Veblen, what determines value? “According to Veblen, the value of an object derives, foremost, not from the importance an individual consumer attaches to the last unit she or he acquires, but from the object’s social significance...” (2020:300). However, this is still a subjective theory of value, even if not as subjective as the marginalist one. There is no further discussion in Camic’s book; it would have been helpful to see a detailed discussion of Veblen’s theory of value.

According to Camic, Veblen saw his book as making “a critical and constructive contribution to economic theory” (2020:299). Camic urges his readers to view Veblen as “the theorist of nonproductivity in relation to productivity” (2020:12) and as someone advancing “a new theory of distribution—a nonproductivity theory...” (2020:293). Later, Camic writes that Veblen was “developing a theory of waste that would defeat the marginalist theory of distribution” (2020:295; also see 340).

For the classical economists, productive labour contributed to the social surplus and unproductive labour did not. The classical economists struggled to come up with an analytically coherent definition because they were wedded to the idea of physical surplus (as in agriculture, and subsequently in manufacturing as well), and so legal and education services were classified as unproductive labour. That is, unproductive labour was *not* unimportant for an economy. Moreover, the productive-unproductive labour notion was associated with their theories of production and growth, *not* income distribution.

According to Camic, Veblen:

“equated nonproductive, pecuniary activities with the jobs of business managers and ‘undertakers’ (Clark’s entrepreneurs), corporate promoters and speculators, bankers and stock brokers, lawyers and real estate agents.... Industrial activities, on the other hand, Veblen associated with inventors, mechanical and civil engineers, industrial chemists and mineralogists, mining experts and electricians, foremen and skilled mechanics, and farmers” (2020:328).

In Veblen’s distinction, there seems to be some cognizance of the idea of a surplus or perhaps it has more to do with “the object’s social significance” (which also determines its value). Unproductive activities “causes a misdirection of social resources; and, in this way, ‘waste’ becomes the ruling economic principle—not ‘productivity,’ as distribution theorists were wrongly asserting” (Camic 2020:294). However, it must be noted that for the classical economists, unproductive labour contains essential workers such as legal and educational workers whereas for Veblen, unproductive



activities “add nothing in serviceability to the community at large” (2020:339) and were a “conspicuous waste” (as he had written in a letter to Sarah Hardy, his love interest, in December 1895) (2020:295; also see 301, 307, 318, 360).

For the marginalists, everyone received according to what they contributed. Veblen fiercely disagreed; as Camic writes, “By Veblen’s account, the leisure class gets plenty, consuming with abandon, all the while doing nothing even remotely productive for the larger ‘human collectivity’” (2020:302). It appears that Veblen’s criticism of the marginal productivity theory was largely empirical, built on a weak theoretical edifice. This point becomes clearer when Camic writes that Veblen considered his own theory of nonproductivity to be “applied only with greater or lesser degrees of probability to individual historical cases” (2020:330). Camic himself admits to this when he writes that Veblen “sought to show empirically that economic conduct is often nonproductive” (2020:336; also see 359). The only criticism Camic makes of Veblen’s distinction is weak: that Veblen’s “dichotomy” did not include scientific activity (2020:337).

The novelty of Veblen’s contribution to distribution theories does not emerge clearly from Camic’s book. It seems as if the novelty is simply asserted by drawing on select secondary assessments. For instance, Camic quotes Frank Taussig (a Marshallian) who notes that Veblen’s distinction “between ‘productive’ and ‘pecuniary’ activity... is a novel one” (2020:322). What is novel is determined by the available paradigms *and* the mainstream paradigm. Since Camic’s definition of originality is not historical (or, as he puts it, “trans-historical”), the arguments around novelty are rather tenuous.

“For Veblen,” writes Camic, “the distribution of wealth between social classes was not an eternal fact of nature; it, too, was an evolving ‘social institution’...” (2020:307). Ironically, this historicity is very much embedded in the classical economists’ idea of exogenous wages.

## **VEBLEN’S PROBLEMATIC EVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVE**

The term “neo-classical”, widely used today to refer to marginalism, belongs to Veblen. He used this term “to label Alfred Marshall’s approach, which combined principles of marginalism and classical economics” (2020:132). As Camic informs us, Veblen called marginalist economists “those economists who adhere with least faltering to the body of modernised classical doctrines” (2020:300).

What was Veblen’s teaching and research experience with respect to the history of economic thought (HET)? Not only did Veblen teach courses dealing with HET, he also published several articles on HET in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, “where it was a natural fit because the journal was a magnet for expository essays on the different kinds of economic theory” (2020:314). In the years 1896 and 1897, he taught the graduate-level courses ‘History of Political Economy’ and ‘Scope and Method of Political Economy’ (2020:314). In his articles, he argued that economics was not an “evolutionary science” because it was “stymied by misguided methodological assumptions” (2020:315). He also wrote review articles on the German Historical School and Marxist economics (2020:319).

During Veblen’s time, it was “standard” to partition economic thought into “the classical school, the German historical school, and the Austrian school” (2020:315). The term “neo-classical” first appears in Veblen’s article ‘The Preconceptions of Economic Science: III’, which was published in the 1900 February issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*; he argued that the “Austrian school

is scarcely distinguishable from the neo-classical, unless it be in the distribution of emphasis” (2020:409, n83).

Despite Veblen’s “dense exegesis of the work of some dozen canonical writers, from worthies like Adam Smith to the marginalists of his own time” (2020:315) and “critical analyses of schools of economic thought” (2020:312), Veblen did not see the markedly different logical structures of classical and marginalist economics. Neither does Camic when he writes that the marginalists are “descendants” of the classical economists (2020:315) and that the “hedonistic theory” is one of the “sequels” of classical economics (2020:317). This dominant and incorrect view largely owes to Alfred Marshall, who saw himself as synthesizing classical and marginalist economics. A recognition that classical and marginalist economics are distinct and competing paradigms had to await the 1960s work of Piero Sraffa and Pierangelo Garegnani. And thus, Veblen’s linear account of the evolution of economic thought stands easily repudiated. Terms such as “neoclassical” matter because they imply intellectual progress, and such a view is based on the problematic view that intellectual progress in economics is cumulative (see Aspromourgos 1986, also cited by Camic (2020:410, n85)). Moreover, such terms deny the existence of competing paradigms in economics.

## CONCLUSION

I find two significant issues with Camic’s biography of Veblen. First, Camic’s unsatisfactory definition of originality when coupled with his rich accounts of Veblen’s teachers yields the following upsetting conclusion: there is nothing particularly original about Veblen’s contributions. Some kind of a resolution is warranted. Second, Camic’s uncritical attitude towards Veblen’s view that marginalism descended from classical economics is disconcerting. Veblen appears to get this idea from his teachers, who in turn, have received their understanding from Mill—whose economics differs in fundamental ways from Smith and Ricardo.

Overall, Camic’s *Veblen* succeeds in providing a satisfactory historical account of Veblen’s economic thought. The sociologist in Camic shines through when he painstakingly pieces together the state of affairs during Veblen’s time, paying close attention to the ideas, politics and people in Veblen’s life. And Camic convincingly takes down Dorfman’s Veblen-as-an-outsider thesis—the dominant view. Camic’s approach to biography, which ought to be replicated, is the following: “The story of the development of Thorstein Veblen’s ideas—like the story behind many major intellectual achievements—is one that involves fields, field entry, knowledge practices, and the process of repetition-with-variation” (2020:358).

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