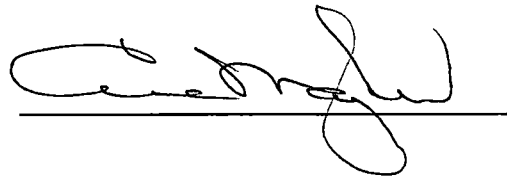


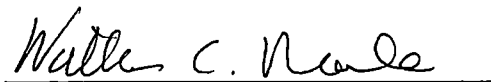
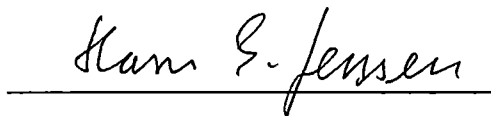
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Raymond Anthony Maynard entitle "Thorstein Veblen On Culture, Biology, and Evolution." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Economics.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Anne Mayhew", written over a horizontal line.

Anne Mayhew, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Robert G. Perrini", written over a horizontal line.A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Walter C. Nanda", written over a horizontal line.A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Hans E. Jensen", written over a horizontal line.

Accepted for the Council:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lew Mink", written over a horizontal line.

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

THORSTEIN VEBLEN ON
CULTURE, BIOLOGY, AND EVOLUTION

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Raymond Anthony Maynard
May, 2000

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Eiman

and

all the other patient people in the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have helped me bring this dissertation to a conclusion. I would like to thank the Economics Department and the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee, and my Dissertation Committee, Anne Mayhew, Walter C. Neale, Hans Jensen, and Robert Perrin. Special thanks are due to Anne and Terry.

The greatest debt of all goes to my wife, Eiman. Without her help and insistence I would never have reached this moment.

ABSTRACT

This work reevaluates the place of biology and evolution in the economics of Thorstein Veblen. It is argued that to understand Veblen's analysis of socioeconomic transformation, the evolution of Veblen's own thinking must receive close attention because his use of biology and evolution changed over time. Veblen is generally taken as using biological evolution as a metaphor for socioeconomic change. However, the biological traits of human beings played a more significant role in Veblen's economic theory than is generally recognized. In his early work Veblen attempted to explain the process of economic evolution by integrate biological and social change into a single process but was unable to clearly distinguish changes in human nature from changes in institutions. After adopting Mendelian mutation theory, Veblen treated human nature as constant and explained socioeconomic evolution in terms of cultural change. With the outbreak of World War I Veblen became more immediately concerned with current affairs and never returned to the question of biology's role in explaining behavior.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: BIOLOGY, EVOLUTION, AND VEBLEN

This dissertation analyzes the uses of biology in the economics of Thorstein Veblen. It is generally accepted that Veblen used ideas from biology both literally and metaphorically. He used such ideas literally in creating his model of human nature, a model that might be classed as sociobiology in the modern parlance. Veblen shared with the sociobiologists the proposition that socioeconomic behavior can be explained, in part, by biological characteristics. The two biological features of human nature that are typically recognized are instinct and race. Veblen also used biological evolution as a metaphor or analogy for cultural evolution.

The presence of biology and evolution in Veblen's work is well enough known so that it is surprising that they have received little detailed attention. As Ann Jennings and Bill Waller note: "Veblen's actual views on biology and evolution in relation to economic processes or critiques of orthodoxy are seldom given the careful analysis they deserve."¹ Instinct receives discussion from time to time, as it is so prevalent in Veblen's writings as to be largely unavoidable. Veblen obviously considered instincts

¹ Jennings and Waller 1998, 189.

important. His writings are full of them; he entitled one of his major articles and one of his major books *The Instinct of Workmanship*. On the other hand, until recently his use of race had been entirely ignored, at least by writers favorable to his work, and even now the tendency exists to play down its biological component.²

More surprising is the lack of detailed analysis of Veblen's evolutionary theory. Veblen is one of the founding fathers of the institutionalist school of economics. Members of this school hold that Veblen's great contributions to economics lie in his introduction of the anthropological concept of culture and his theory of cultural evolution.³ Institutional economists accept the idea of cultural evolution as a matter of course but, as recent debate demonstrates, they agree remarkably little on the details of Veblen's evolutionary theory.⁴

Recent debate has been sparked by a revival of interest in biology, evolution, and biological evolution in economics. Veblen has always been talked about, but his writings have received a renewed importance due to this

² See Jennings and Waller 1998. Of course, hostile critics have had less trouble seeing Veblen's wrinkles and more trouble recognizing his virtues; see Tilman 1992.

³ See Jennings and Waller 1998; Mayhew 1987a and 1987b.

⁴ See Edgell and Tilman 1989; Tilman 1996; Jennings and Waller 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998; Hodgson 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998; Rutherford 1998a, 1998b; Mayhew 1998a, 1998b.

trend in economics. Credit for starting this revival must be given to Geoffrey Hodgson, who has strongly and extensively advocated the use of biology as a source of inspiration for modeling economic processes. In his review of the various writers who have attempted to make economics more evolutionary, Hodgson concludes that Veblen is the most successful to date and that the work of economists would benefit from building on his foundations.⁵

The debate on Veblen provoked by Hodgson's work has forced institutionalists to re-examine some of the central concepts of one of their central theorists. While important as a question of intellectual history, it also has a more contemporary importance. Even before the current promotion of evolution, Veblen was a lot more than a dim figure in the history of economic thought. A substantial body of writers both within economics and within other social sciences has found Veblen's writings an ongoing source of inspiration in many areas of investigation. Consequently it would be beneficial to reach some consensus on Veblen's most fundamental ideas.

While the current debate has focused a good deal of attention by knowledgeable Veblen scholars on a specific and highly important aspect of his work, its participants have reached little more consensus than they began with, to

⁵ Hodgson 1992, 1993, 1998.

wit: Veblen has a theory of cultural evolution. But everyone has a different version of what that theory is, and how valuable it might be for the future development of institutionalism. Nonetheless, the debate has been enormously valuable in highlighting the areas of disagreement, which provides the first step towards some consensus.

The lack of resolution in this debate is striking as it has occurred between people with a very similar approach to social analysis, a positive attitude to Veblen's work, and a general agreement on the main content and value of his theory. Also striking has been the ability to support seemingly contradictory positions by accurate references to Veblen's work; *The Leisure Class* and *The Instinct of Workmanship* being most frequently cited.⁶ It would be foolish to claim that Veblen's work is entirely consistent that is, internally consistent when judged in its own terms. His writings inevitably contain some muddle as, entirely alone, he was attempting to synthesize concepts from a wide range of disciplines and create a brand new evolutionary economics.⁷ I will argue that the contradictory

⁶ That adherents to a creed fight more viciously among themselves than with heretics is well enough attested by the history of Christianity and Marxism. While Veblen has his devotees, I do not think their disagreements can be attributed to a rise in fanaticism, perhaps because Veblen has not been reduced to a few memorable slogans. Nor did he predict a benevolent vision of the future.

⁷ As an example of this type of inconsistency I cite Chapters 8 and 9

interpretations of his theory in the recent debates are based on other types of inconsistencies in Veblen's writings. Many of these can be explained as consequences of unresolved issues of his time, and apparently conflicting views of Veblen's work can be brought into harmony.

Interpretations of Veblen's work will be greatly improved if more attention is paid to two closely related facets of his writing:

1. the intellectual-historical context in which he was trained and wrote, and
2. the evolution of his own thought.

Veblen's life covered a period of important transition within social science that may roughly be described as the movement from biological to cultural explanations for social behavior. More accurately, during this period social scientists disentangled cultural from biological determinants of social behavior and dismissed the biological as insignificant. Veblen grew up in an intellectual environment transformed by Charles Darwin and among a people who saw their nation as the embodiment of the truths of Herbert Spencer. The influence of Darwin and

from *Leisure Class*, which will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. These chapters are of crucial importance for his work as a whole, as they are one of the few places where he attempts to lay out in detail his evolutionary theory. Veblen usually constructed his arguments with precision and wrote with a tone of authority even when in doubt. His arguments in these chapters approaches unintelligibility as he cannot decide, as he makes clear, whether the evolutionary process he is supposedly explaining is cultural or biological or some combination of the two.

Spencer on Veblen need not be argued. In fact, Veblen studied at Yale under William Graham Sumner, who was not only America's leading social Darwinist, but also the main proponent of blending Spencer's evolutionary theory with Ricardian, laissez-faire economics. Veblen's academic career began in the 1890s as Spencerism went into decline and continued through the ascendancy of 'culture' an explanatory variable in the following three decades, as Franz Boas and his followers rose to academic power. This, of course, was not marked by an abrupt jump. The concept of culture was being used in something like its modern sense from at least the 1870s, and social Darwinism remained a presence into the 1920s.⁸ In true evolutionary fashion, biology gradually declined and culture emerged.⁹

Again, this is well enough known, but its full significance has not yet been drawn out. Nearly everyone

⁸ In fact, beliefs in the links between biology and social behavior that underlay social Darwinism have never gone away entirely and have been in the ascendant, once more, since the late 1960s.

⁹ I am talking of the broad shift in thinking within the social sciences, within particular areas the case was different. Cultural anthropology underwent something of a paradigm change from evolution to particularism at the hands of Franz Boas and his followers, in the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the story is not as clear-cut as it seems. Although both the leading cultural evolutionists, Tylor and Morgan, had no doubt that western civilization was best, and there was some biological factor involved, each developed his work independently of Darwin and Spencer, and it can be read without any implication of biological evolution. Standard histories of economics give the impression that social Darwinism and cultural relativism had little influence on the discipline. This picture is exaggerated, but perhaps not enough to be statistically significant.

who was a major influence on Veblen's own thinking did their work in the evolutionary milieu of Darwin and Spencer in the second half of the nineteenth century. Nearly everyone who has written about Veblen has done their own work in the wake of cultural relativism and behavioral psychology. As a consequence there has resulted a systematic bias in interpreting Veblen's work in too modern a manner. Or, to put it the other way, many aspects of Veblen's work are more old fashioned than is normally recognized.¹⁰ Veblen not only lived through this period of intellectual transition, he was one of the contributors to it. In his writing Veblen was trying to work through the kinds of problems in social analysis that led from an emphasis on biology to an emphasis on culture, and that are difficult to appreciate now when the distinctions seem so obvious.¹¹ Institutionalists have treated Veblen as ahead of

¹⁰ I am confining my comments to people who have been sympathetic to Veblen's work rather than those who are openly hostile. Although it must be said that hostile critics have often pointed out realities in Veblen's work that supporters were unable to see.

¹¹ A simple though tricky point in this context involves changes in the meaning of words. For example, race and culture carried different connotations to the Victorian social scientist than they do to modern writers. On this see Mayhew 1998b and Stocking 1964. Another word that has not so much changed meaning but has a variety of meanings is 'evolution.' This word has caused an enormous amount of mischief among writers on Veblen, not so much in what the word means as to what it may be applied. So far as I am aware, institutionalists take Veblen to mean cultural evolution whenever he uses this word and no one has questioned this conclusion. A central conclusion of the current work is that Veblen frequently intended evolution to be taken in its biological sense.

the game, as a pioneer who simply mapped out the path for others to follow.

This impression has been reinforced by Veblen's importance as an inspiration for other writers. Few people who use Veblen's ideas approach him with a purely historical interest. They are rarely involved in a search for what Veblen was, but rather for ways in which his theoretical apparatus can be put to use. This is a credit to Veblen's stature as a social thinker and is an entirely laudable pursuit. Veblen's true value lies in his contribution to understanding the socioeconomic processes of today, and if his work inspires a useful theory it might not matter if it is not exactly what Veblen had in mind.¹² After all, it is good science to build on the insights of those who have gone before. But this does not make for good history. Inevitably distorted interpretations have resulted from reinventing Veblen as a support for modern theory.¹³

¹² Two notable examples of this practice are Geoffrey Hodgson and Clarence Ayres. Among economic theorists Hodgson has been commendable for his detailed attention to the history of the discipline. However, the main value of Veblen's work to Hodgson is to provide a foundation for building up a feasible evolutionary economics. His rearticulation of Veblenian theory in the vocabulary of modern biology demonstrates my point. Ayres is most notable for his development of the Veblenian dichotomy and for his theory of economic progress. See Ayres 1962.

¹³ Veblen has something of the same relationship to institutionalists that Marx and Keynes do to the schools of thought they inspired in economics. They act both as founding fathers and as current sources of inspiration. For the purpose of current inspiration, Veblen is better presented as an advocate of dynamic institutional evolution than as an advocate of instinct psychology, racial anthropology, or a mechanistic biology. On this, see the exchange between Allan Gruchy and Kenneth Boulding cited in Tilman 1992, 12.

Historical and Intellectual Context

The two facets of Veblen's work that need greater attention would require an entire research agenda producing many volumes. For this work I have a less ambitious target. I will concentrate on a few major components of Veblen's evolutionary theory, namely

1. The biological evolution associated with Darwin and Spencer (and later Mendel);
2. The anthropological evolution associated with Edward Burnet Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, (Herbert Spencer should also be included here);¹⁴ and
3. Racial Anthropology.

I focus on these components of Veblen's ideas because so much of the debate on Veblen's evolution and biology revolves around them.

One major idea that is omitted from this list is instinct theory. This must be considered in any discussion of biology in Veblen's work, and I will examine it in some detail. However, I exclude it here as Veblen's use of instinct theory is fairly well understood and agreed upon among critics and does not require the same type of re-evaluation as the other theories.

¹⁴ Particularly Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, first published in 1871, (reprinted in two volumes as Tylor 1958a and 1958b); Morgan's *Ancient Society*, first published in 1877 (reprinted as Morgan 1985); and Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, first published in 1876 in three volumes, (reprinted as Spencer 1896).

Two observations can be made now about these theories that anticipate the discussion ahead. Accepting that these represent central (though not exclusive) components of Veblen's evolutionary theory, it can be seen first that, with the exception of the biological theories of Darwin and Mendel, all of these theories plus instinct psychology were losing credibility in the first decade of the twentieth century. Veblen persisted with these ideas, but by the end of the Great War they had fallen into disrepute in scientific circles and have not been revived. Indeed, theories of socioeconomic evolution, whether based on biology or not, were considered passé. The type of 'grand' theory Veblen attempted to build was considered old fashioned and based on outmoded ideas.¹⁵

Second, I will argue that the theories Veblen drew upon were only compatible under a particular assumption: that progress was real and important.¹⁶ Racial anthropology, cultural stages, and Spencerian evolution could only blend together if white, Northern European civilization was obviously on top and the other races could be arranged in

¹⁵ I am not suggesting that this applies to all of Veblen's work, nor that it reduces its value for modern social theorists. Of tremendous value are those other central features of Veblen's theory that have survived, habits and institutions and how they evolve.

¹⁶ Racial anthropology itself was based on conflicting ideas, as Veblen later recognized; see Veblen 1913. Anthropologists accepted both ongoing biological evolution and the persistence of racial types. Veblen encountered great difficulty in *The Leisure Class* attempting to harmonize these irreconcilable propositions.

declining cultural stages beneath it; each one pointing upwards towards the inevitable end of evolution, the perfect harmony of the individual and society. Biology, culture and progress became one in Spencer's system.¹⁷ Veblen disrupted this harmony by introducing both a Darwinian perspective and an appreciation of the role of culture that came closer to relativism than most of his contemporaries.¹⁸ This created tensions in Veblen's theory that he never fully resolved. These tensions are particularly acute in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* although they were mitigated after his adoption of Mendelian mutation theory. This allowed him to treat human nature as fixed and thus separate the biological and cultural factors in behavior.¹⁹

Historical Facts Not Considered

The work of any writer results from a complex interaction between the writer and the social environment. Consequently, light can be shed on Veblen's work by

¹⁷ Both the evolutionary and racial anthropologists were in broad agreement with Spencer on this matter, as was the body of intellectual wisdom and prejudice among the European peoples in the Victorian era.

¹⁸ Here, again, Veblen is much closer to the older anthropologists than the later ones. Like Tylor, Veblen had a fair minded appreciation of the other chap's achievements and the short comings of his own society, which is not a strict relativism. He could also be incredibly biased, as in his attitude that anything bad was barbarian, and anything barbarian was bad.

¹⁹ See below especially Chapters VI and VII.

examining his character and the broader socioeconomic environment in which he worked. To argue for their importance in shaping his theories is needless. It is clear enough that the particular thrust of Veblen's work was to provide a body of theory to explain what was happening to American society at this time. I have no new observations on this interrelationship and will take this background as given. However, one event that does require particular notice is the Great War. This obviously had a profound effect on everyone and it was evidently instrumental in redirecting the focus of Veblen's work from about 1917.

Attempts to interpret Veblen's work in light of his personal history have caused far more mischief than enlightenment so far, and I will avoid this type of speculation. Many ideas about Veblen's life and personality have turned out to contain a large element of myth, and scholars are still trying to escape from their influence. I will shortly mention some of the negative results to scholarship that have resulted from appealing to this mythical Veblen for guidance.²⁰

²⁰ See Dorfman 1966; Tilman 1996, chapter 1; Isador Lubin's "Recollections of Veblen" in Qualey 1968; Gilman 1999; and Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1999.

Evolution of Veblen's Thought

In addition to paying closer attention to the historical context of intellectual influences, I am proposing an approach to the development of Veblen's thinking different from that usually employed. A tendency exists in the literature to treat Veblen's work as a consistent whole. Put in its simplest (and silliest) form, this means Veblen sat down in the 1890s and spent the next thirty-five years writing out a theory already fully developed in his mind, and that putative theory is one of cultural evolution. Perhaps no one would accept this claim when it is put so bluntly. Nevertheless, this position is tacitly accepted when writers support a point by juxtaposing passages from Veblen's works written decades apart, as if Veblen never changed his mind about anything.

This approach may be legitimate in some contexts. A core theme does run through Veblen's work from beginning to end: the evolution of institutions. Veblen defines institutions as "habits of thought" in the 1890s as in the 1920s, and claimed that the important thing for social analysis was explaining their nature and causes. This gives his work a surface appearance of consistency that masks some significant variations underneath. The picture of Veblen I wish to present deviates quite significantly from the persistent, cultural Veblen. This is not intended as an

alternative picture, but rather as part of a fuller portrayal.

Veblen's career covered the period of transition in the social sciences that I have described for simplicity as the transition from biology to culture, and that roughly corresponds to the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Veblen is generally accepted as one of the pioneers of the cultural approach, as someone who moved the social sciences forward. This is correct, but only partly so. Veblen inevitably carried many nineteenth century attitudes, which is why attention to his intellectual roots is important. The Veblen who began his theory building in the 1890s was much more in line with the older point of view than is commonly acknowledged. In particular, there was a strong Spencerian influence on his work that makes biology a major feature of his early theory of institutional evolution.²¹ That influence declined steadily until the 1920s, when biology was almost entirely absent.

²¹ It is well known that Veblen closely read Spencer's work and attacked aspects of it in his own writing, particularly Spencer's teleology, support for laissez-faire, and associationist psychology. These differences are easily observed as Veblen draws attention to them; yet substantial similarities exist also. I will argue below that Veblen incorporated into his early theory building Spencer's biological reductionism and Lamarckian evolutionary processes. Veblen was certainly aware of this 'past binding' influence on his own thought, and indeed the thought of everybody. This is shown in his last published essay "Economic Theory in the Calculable Future," reprinted in Veblen 1998c[1925].

If it can be accepted that Veblen was something of a Spencerian when he commenced his economic work, it becomes tempting to provide a story that Veblen's thought evolved along the path from biology to culture. Certainly the trend in Veblen's writing seems to imply such an argument. For example, Veblen's writing took a distinct shift after the Great War and his use of biology fell into the background, leaving the cultural aspects of his work more prominent. However, to claim such a straightforward transition would be to over simplify the facts. Although Veblen's legacy has been his analysis of cultural processes, Veblen himself never passed over to a purely cultural explanation for behavior. Veblen ended his career as an economist with many of the same views with which he commenced it. He continued to believe that nurture and nature were both important for explaining human behavior. What happened in between was an interaction between external intellectual trends and the internal development of Veblen's own theory that left Veblen at the end of the war with neither a scientifically legitimate explanation for the role of biology, nor the evolutionary framework in which he might have developed the cultural aspects of his work.²²

²² The last piece Veblen wrote, "An Experiment in Eugenics," would seem to provide clear support for the arguments presented here. However, this article appears to me as an extended piece of irony in which Veblen implies that the case of Norway would supply evidence against eugenics, not in support of it.

After the war Veblen narrowed his theoretical vision and focused on the more recent history of the North Atlantic economies. This post-war shift has been recognized and various explanations advanced for its occurrence. However, there is a tendency to treat his work up to this time as all-of-a-whole and neglect the significant shifts in emphasis that occurred earlier. This neglect has created much of the misunderstanding over Veblen's uses of biology and evolution. For example, writers are able to support contrary opinions on Veblen's use of biological evolution depending on whether they quote from *The Leisure Class* published in 1899, or *The Instinct of Workmanship* of 1914. It has been tacitly accepted that Veblen used the same model in both books. This means that when contrary interpretations arise one of them must be wrong, or Veblen's theory is simply incoherent. I believe Veblen's model shifted significantly between these two books and that the process of evolution Veblen had in mind only seems incoherent if this is not recognized.²³

²³ For example, based on *The Leisure Class*, Edgell and Tilman 1989 believe Veblen saw human (biological) evolution as ongoing; based on *The Instinct of Workmanship*, Rutherford 1998, believes Veblen took evolution as fixed in the distant past. As usual, Veblen himself is more of a hinderance than a help in these matters as he never identifies changes in his opinions.

A Chronological Approach to Veblen's Theory

For the purposes of investigating the uses of biology in Veblen's writing it is crucial to treat his work chronologically. Veblen's work will be divided into three period: his 'early' work, which runs from the start of his career as an economist through to 1913; his 'later' work, which runs from 1913 until the entry of the United States into the war in 1917; and his 'final' work, which runs from 1917 until his death in 1929. These periods are distinguished by the different roles biology played in his work.

The most important works for the early period are "The Instinct of Workmanship and the Irsomeness of Labour" and *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In these works Veblen tries, unsuccessfully, to develop an evolutionary theory that explains the cumulative interaction of biology and culture in the process of social evolution. Veblen describes this process as one of "selective adaptation" that blends, or perhaps blurs, ideas from Darwinian and Spencerian evolution. Veblen does not insist on a clear distinction between these two methodological approaches at this stage in his work.

In "The Instinct of Workmanship" Veblen provides a coherent argument for the origins of the instinct of workmanship through the inheritance of acquired characteristics, in the Spencerian mode. Habitual patterns

of action lead to habitual patterns of thought that can pass from the status of habit to that of instinct. These instincts are then inherited by offspring through biological reproduction. Veblen offers no explanation as to how habits become heritable, and ambiguity exists as to where habits end and instincts begin. However, these faults were typical of the writings of the time, when it was still widely believed that acquired traits could be transmitted and the laws of heredity were still undiscovered.

In *The Leisure Class* Veblen attempted to extend the logic of this argument to social evolution as a whole. Chapters 8 and 9 are of crucial importance for this discussion as they represent one of the few times when Veblen tries to set down the exact mechanism of social evolution. The details of Veblen's argument will be examined at length in a later chapter. It may be said for now that these chapters are probably the most incoherent passages in all of Veblen's writings. Veblen tries to make a Spencerian argument for cultural and biological interdependence and development. Unfortunately, because he sees biological evolution as ongoing, it is impossible, at this time, to distinguish which behavior is simply habitual and which has become instinctive. Veblen admits that it might all be "a process of habituation in the old fashioned

sense of the word."²⁴ In addition to this confusion, he also includes, in an essentially dynamic process, the constant characteristics of "persistent ethnic types."

Given the confusion in these chapters it is tempting to dismiss them as largely nonsensical and largely unimportant to Veblen's theory.²⁵ However, deciphering these passages is essential to an accurate understanding of Veblen's perspective at this time, and also how his work developed over the next decade or so. First, they show that Veblen was not using biological evolution as a mere metaphor for cultural evolution, at least not at this time. Second, given Veblen's insistence that economics should study the evolution of institutions, it is surprising how little discussion Veblen provides of the details of this evolution.²⁶ The *Leisure Class* is one of the few times Veblen tries to detail the process. Third, Veblen's failure to provide a coherent explanation for the evolutionary process at this time affected the direction of his work over the next decade. Veblen had intended his second book to be *The Instinct of Workmanship*.²⁷ It was his inability to

²⁴ Veblen 1975[1899], 221. If Veblen had followed up this conclusion he could have developed his theory along more coherent lines. But he was too imbued in the Spencerian/Darwinian biologism of the nineteenth century to abandon instincts and race. E. Anton Eff believes that habituation in this context "would certainly be Spencer's Lamarckism" (Eff 1989, 701-2).

²⁵ For example, Jennings and Waller 1996, 1998.

²⁶ As Malcolm Rutherford 1998 has observed.

separate the biotic from the cultural factors in behavior that delayed this project.

After 1900 Veblen develops some of his ideas on biology and evolution. He draws an important distinction between tropisms and instincts, and introduces the instinctive bent of "idle curiosity." He also adopts a strongly Darwinian scientific stance and speaks out against Spencerian teleology and the notions of progress with which he had toyed in *The Leisure Class*. However, he does not attempt another detailed exposition of the mechanisms of evolutionary change. This is not to detract from the value of his contribution during this time. On the contrary, much of Veblen's most important work falls within the first decade of the twentieth century, including his critiques of Marxist and neoclassical economics, his discussions of the nature and evolution of science, and his analysis of the relationship between business and industry which became the focus of his work after 1917.²⁸

My contention is that while the first decade of the twentieth century saw Veblen working out various points and aspects of his theory, he could not move forward with what

²⁷ Dorfman 1966, 197, 295, and 1973, 98.

²⁸ See the articles for this period reprinted in Veblen 1990, especially "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," "The Limitations of Marginal Utility," "The Socialist Economics of Karl Marx," "The Place of Science in Modern Civilization," "The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View," and "Industrial and Pecuniary Employments." See also his second book *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, published in 1904.

might be called his "grand" theory of social evolution as he was not yet able to separate changes in human nature (biology) from changes in culture (habit).²⁹ The solution to this difficulty came with Mendelian mutation theory, and its adoption into Veblen's writings marks the start of his "later" work.

Mutation theory allowed Veblen to fix human nature, along racial lines, sometime in pre-history, and explain all social evolution since that time in terms of culture alone. In "The Mutation Theory and the Blond Race," published in 1913, Veblen pointed to the contradictions in racial theories that at once insists on the stability of racial types while also appealing to the Darwinian mechanism of an ongoing, selective survival of slight variations, which could only imply that racial types were unstable. Here Veblen identified part of the inconsistency in theories that had caused him so much trouble in *The Leisure Class*. Mutation theory solved this problem by rejecting the importance of slight variations.³⁰ Veblen was

²⁹ I am concerned almost exclusively with the psychological features of biological evolution, although the physical characteristics could play a significant role under certain circumstances, such as during the fighting period of barbarism.

³⁰ From the onset Darwin had trouble explaining how slight variation appearing in a single individual could persist, as his theory seemed to require, instead of being merged back into the traits of the general population. At first, Mendel's work seemed to offer an alternative to Darwinian evolution, although in the end it provided the explanation for heredity that was to resolve this Darwinian difficulty.

now freed from worrying about the effects of the cultural environment on human nature that Spencerism required, or random changes in human nature that Darwinism implied. Veblen could now take the traits of human nature as fixed and focus on cultural changes.³¹

This does not mean that human nature became unimportant in explaining behavior, and particularly in explaining cultural growth over the long run. Veblen still saw instincts as driving human beings to act in certain directions and races as having different biologically based psychological traits represented by the distribution of emphasis among the generic complement of instincts. These differences among races might be only slight initially, but they could amount to a great deal in the cumulative process of cultural growth. Hence, the dolichocephalic blond type had come to the forefront of technological and scientific progress among the human community because it possessed a slightly more pronounced instinct of workmanship.

As far as I am aware no one has attached any

³¹ Veblen may have initially derived the idea of treating human nature as constant from William McDougall's *Introduction to Social Psychology*, published in 1908, which Veblen cites in *The Instinct of Workmanship*. McDougall accepted biological evolution but treated instincts as constant in his own work, apparently to avoid just the type of problems Veblen had encountered. Veblen probably needed mutation theory to provide a scientific justification for the constancy of human nature before he could use this assumption in his own work.

significance to Veblen's adoption of mutation theory.³² I think it provided Veblen with a partial solution to the problems he had encountered in *The Leisure Class* and allowed him to tie together the threads of theory he had been developing over the previous two decades. Using mutation theory Veblen brought into harmony the conflicting facets of his early work. First, he had a scientific basis for his notions of human nature in line with biological evolutionary theory. Second, this biological theory avoided the clash between Darwinian/Spencerian theory that required a constantly changing human nature and racial anthropology that required the stability of racial types. Third, as Veblen was now able to treat human nature as constant since the last Ice Age, he could now trace the stages of cultural evolution in terms of cultural change alone.

The result of this harmonizing of theories was *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*, which may be taken as Veblen's *magnum opus*: it is here that he combines into one coherent whole, the various aspects of the theory he had been developing for the past twenty years.³³

³² The only comment this has attracted is from Hodgson, who takes it as showing that Veblen was "sufficiently up to date" with developments in evolutionary biology. See Hodgson 1992, 287.

³³ This is not to suggest that this book is necessarily the most valuable one for later economists. Nevertheless, it was the book Veblen had been working towards for some two decades and "closed the cycle" of work that had begun with "Why is Economics not an

The utilization of mutation theory marks a clear point of division between Veblen's early and later work. The transition from there to his final work has no such clear demarcation.³⁴ Usually, and probably for convenience, the recognized shift in Veblen's focus in his later years is dated from the end of the First World War. For the purposes of this discussion the start of the war in Europe might be a better date. After *The Instinct of Workmanship* the course of Veblen's work is partly shaped by the internal developments of his own theory and partly by external events.

First, because *The Instinct of Workmanship* really encapsulates Veblen's grand theory, it marks the ending or fulfillment of a period of theory building. Now Veblen could keep repeating the same things or strike out in other directions. Second, events in the social sciences were moving against Veblen's type of theorizing. What had struck Veblen as the "ultra modern view" in the 1890s looked distinctly old fashioned by 1915. The cultural evolution of Tylor and Morgan already stood discredited in cultural anthropology; in biology and psychology instinct theory was either being dropped or severely restricted in meaning; and

Evolutionary Science?" in 1898. Dorfman 1964, 324 reports that Veblen considered it his most valuable book.

³⁴ It should be remembered that these divisions are only intended as convenient for the current purpose. For other purposes other distinctions would apply.

racial explanations for behavior were becoming increasingly suspect as distinctions between culture and biology became increasingly apparent. In a word, major components of Veblen's theory were now invalid. And of course, there was also the war.

The war began in Europe while Veblen was writing *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*. The book begins with a discussion of race and contains an extensive supplement on the distribution of races in Europe. Veblen compares the Germans to the English, but rather than providing any explanations for behavioral differences, race is rejected as unimportant, as the peoples of the two nations are of identical racial stock. Consequently, any differences between them can only be ascribed to their different cultural histories. Mutation theory allowed Veblen to distinguish between cultural and biological change, but, by fixing human nature in the Stone Age, biological factors became less relevant for explaining the course of events. It became essentially irrelevant as Veblen came to focus almost exclusively on the North Atlantic economies.³⁵

It is unnecessary to argue that the war itself had a substantial impact on Veblen's writing and that his shift

³⁵ This does not imply that Veblen rejected race as an explanatory variable between distinct racial stocks. Race simply had limited importance when Veblen focused on Europeans, which he mostly did for the remainder of his career.

in focus in his final work was probably more in response to that particular event than any other combination of factors. While Veblen had assumed a Darwinian attitude to the course of events and warned against the dangers of "imbecile institutions," the war must still have come as a blow to someone who claimed that humans were by nature peaceable savages and was cautiously optimistic that the machine technology would undermine the predatory, barbarian animus. During the war Veblen's writing became more propagandistic and polemical, and a more bitter, less dispassionate tone is evident. Veblen continued with his belief that biology counted for something in human behavior but, even if he could have regenerated his psychological theories in line with modern preconceptions, his subject matter left little scope for such analysis.³⁶ And by his own confession, by the time the war ended, Veblen had already entered that period of life when people stopped having new ideas.³⁷

The current debate on Veblen's work has added to a substantial body of analysis that has been established over the years, and I think the present work runs the risk of being seen as simply repeating other people's observations or, at best, making hair-splitting distinctions between

³⁶ See Tilman 1992, 156.

³⁷ Veblen 1998c[©1925], 4.

them. It is true that the evidence I will present to support my argument is well known, and that most of the interpretations of the details of Veblen's work have been made by others, at one time or another. But this is really gives the point of this work: if the evidence is looked at from a slightly different point of view, many of the conflicting interpretations of Veblen's work can be reconciled. However, it does not resolve all of the conflicts, and some of the problems with Veblen's work can probably never be resolved. Veblen tried to create a holistic theory of social evolution by melding ideas from a range of social disciplines. Some of these ideas were not entirely compatible to begin with, some underwent extensive revision during Veblen's career, and some remain contentious today. Working almost alone in uncharted territory, Veblen tried to create a new evolutionary economics and many portions of his theory failed. Nonetheless, by focusing on the evolution of institutions, he did set the foundations for the future development of an evolutionary economics.

Unhistorical Interpretations of Veblen

Much valuable work has been done and is being done on Veblen, on the details of his life, on the influences on his thinking and on his thinking itself. The older views are being replaced. Two of these older views have been

particularly detrimental to understanding Veblen's work.

The first might be called the "spaceman theory;" the second is the rearticulation of Veblen by Clarence Ayres.

The spaceman theory, in its crudest terms, claims Veblen was an eccentric and idiosyncratic thinker who arrived in modern America from an isolated, frontier town where only Norwegian was spoken. Consequently, he possessed a unique, isolated and alien view of American culture that was largely uninfluenced by other currents of intellectual thought in the broader society. Thus Veblen could see society in the United States with the objectivity of someone who had arrived from outer space rather than with the subjective, cultural biases of a typical American.³⁸

There is an element of truth in this picture. Veblen was certainly idiosyncratic and his genius did lie in being able to apply the anthropological perspective to his own society. This genius is perhaps heightened by the fact that he was far less 'alien' to this society than the spaceman

³⁸ Hofstadter 1955, 65, describes Veblen as "an unacclimated alien;" Rosenberg 1956, entitles the first chapter of his book on Veblen "The Stranger;" John Maurice Clark 1957, 59 speaks of Veblen's "Olympian Detachment;" Wesley Mitchell 1936, ix, claims Veblen, like David Hume, "was and was not a child of his time;" Eff 1989 alleges that Veblen viewed life like a Norwegian peasant. Norwegian social scientist H.O. Christopersen viewed Veblen as "that visitor from another world" and "like the Stranger in an Ibsen drama." Hence Veblen was "a thorn in the flesh to Americans and no doubt he would have been to us had he lived in Norway--but with a difference, that here a few would have understood him." Quoted in Dorfman 1973, 288. In a recent biography Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1999, 4 refer to Veblen as "a Christ-like visionary" and "a hero in an old Norse myth--one who....laughs while his foes cut his heart out of his living flesh."

theory implies. Careful research into the details of Veblen's life and work has proved that most of the ingredients that created this theory have turned out to be exaggerated or simply false. Apparently Veblen contributed to some of the myths that surrounded him: for example, that he did not learn English properly until he attended Carleton College.³⁹

As to Veblen's intellectual contributions, certainly within the history of economics Veblen does give the impression that he arrived from outer space simply because he built his own theory from disciplines outside of economics. Something of a minor industry has grown up around tracing the influences on Veblen's thought, some of which are obvious because Veblen refers to them directly, and some of which are speculative.⁴⁰ Once again Veblen has been less than helpful to these endeavors. In his early work, Veblen provides practically no references; in his later work he provides few. Unfortunately, his later work builds upon the earlier foundations so that the original published sources of his ideas, if any, become no clearer. Veblen also has the habit of presenting his original insights as if they were "common knowledge," "tedious truisms," or "notorious."

³⁹ See, for example, Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1999, 183.

⁴⁰ An extensive though by no means exhaustive list of influences is provided by Edgell and Tilman 1989.

Dangers exist in the type of influence mining that Veblenian scholars have found it necessary to undertake. There is the risk of overemphasizing certain influences, misinterpreting Veblen's work to conform to that of another prior influence, or simply to create a possible influence because someone else said something similar at an earlier time and then to assume Veblen knew of it.⁴¹ However, I think that to date this process has been useful in that it has demonstrated to people who are mostly familiar with the literature of economics that many people were talking about similar issues around the turn of the century.

My second point concerns the influence of Clarence Ayres on current Veblen scholarship. Ayres rearticulated Veblen for a new generation of institutional economists after World War Two. I have no intention of arguing that Ayres got Veblen wrong and shunted institutional economics onto the wrong track. On the contrary, Ayres probably preserved what was most useful in Veblen's work and employed it in developing *neoinstitutional* theory. However, with the 'Veblenian dichotomy' Ayres shunted interpretations of Veblen's work onto the wrong track,

⁴¹ For example, two writers who clearly influenced Veblen's thinking were Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer. Veblen's work has similarities and differences to the work of both of these men, although in tracing these influences many writers have tended to play up the similarities between Veblen and Marx, and play up the dissimilarities between Veblen and Spencer. See, among others, Edgell and Tilman 1989 and Eff 1989.

partly because he directed attention to a limited area of Veblen's economic theory, and partly because he oversimplified that area. Through his influence on post-War institutional thinking Ayres has left his own coloring on Veblen. Given that Ayres is much easier to understand than Veblen and that most people come to Veblen's writings either directly or indirectly through Ayres' work, it is not surprising that Veblen has been interpreted in an Ayresian fashion, and that it has taken thinkers some time to disengage Ayres and Veblen. This has led to the rather astonishing, even embarrassing result that institutionalists do not know, or at least cannot agree upon, the details of Veblen's evolutionary theory.⁴²

⁴² For a recent and extensive confusion of Veblen with Ayres see Jones 1986, and the subsequent comment by Tilman 1990, and the reply by Jones 1990. Tool 1986 and Bush 1987 see a more fruitful dichotomy being made between the instrumental and ceremonial aspects of institutions. More recently Anne Mayhew has claimed that "Ayres interpretation of Veblen was not far off the mark," Mayhew 1998b, 458.

CHAPTER II

CULTURE, RACE, AND EVOLUTION

A great figure in science should be judged by the characteristics which set him apart from and ahead of his contemporaries, not by the errors and shortcomings which he shares with them.

Leslie White¹

Introduction

Veblen is known for his eclectic approach to economics. He borrowed widely from other disciplines and combined their ideas into his own brand of evolutionary economics. To provide an accurate assessment of Veblen's evolutionary theory it will prove necessary to examine some of the theories he borrowed. The major sources for the evolutionary aspects of his theory seem to have been biological evolutionary theory and anthropology, both cultural and physical. In his early work Veblen attempted to combine these into an integrated theory of biological and cultural evolution. At this stage the influence of Spencer on Veblen's social thinking is clear.

Unfortunately, the different strands Veblen tried to braid together proved incompatible with one another, largely because they each contained different assumptions about human nature. In order to explain the difficulties these theories raised for Veblen, the history of cultural and

¹ White 1987, 87.

physical anthropology will have to be traced from the late eighteenth century through to Veblen's adoption of them in the 1890s. Also, the contributions of biological evolution from Lamarck, Darwin, and Mendel must be described.

The story of anthropology comes in four parts. The first occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century when evolutionary anthropology had its beginnings in the application of the comparative method to the history of mankind. The second part involved thoughts about the origins of human races. Concern with this issue begins in roughly the same period, but comes to dominate anthropology in the first half of the nineteenth century. The second half of that century saw the resurgence in the comparative method in the hands of Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, and the development of physical anthropology, particularly in continental Europe where the absorbing question was the scientific analysis of race. The final part of the story starts about 1900 when the comparative method comes under serious attack from environmentalists, particularly Franz Boas, and quickly loses credibility and is abandoned.

The story of biology is of the three evolutionary theories associated with the names of Lamarck, Darwin, and Mendel. Each is based on a different evolutionary process and each has different implications for the biological history of mankind, and for social evolution in so far as

each is applicable metaphorically.

Veblen attempted to blend all of these ingredients into his own evolutionary theory in various measures at various times. Unfortunately, this eclectic mix failed. Both cultural and physical anthropology claimed to be 'evolutionary' at this time and Veblen seems to have believed that made them compatible, somehow, within a post-Darwinian (or, more accurately, Spencerian) evolutionary framework.

The work of Herbert Spencer seems to have been the major influence on Veblen's vision of the evolutionary process, as it had been for many hundreds of less capable social theorists for over forty years. Veblen diverged from Spencer on particular and quite major points from the very beginning, and became more Darwinian and increasingly hostile to Spencerism as his theorizing developed. Nevertheless, Veblen's vision of a synthesis of evolutionary processes containing biology and culture owes more to Spencer than to Darwin. By his own admission Veblen started his academic career as a "disciple" of Spencer, and his early work, particularly *The Leisure Class*, shows Spencer's stamp.² More than any other writer, including Darwin, Spencer takes the credit or blame for the social Darwinist milieu of the Victorian age. While Spencer's work

² "Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism," Veblen 1990h[©1892].

will be mentioned in this chapter it, and social Darwinism as a whole, will be examined more extensively in the next chapter.

The Comparative Method: Conjectural History and The Psychic Unity of Mankind

In *Race, Culture and Evolution* George Stocking questions the common belief that Edward Burnet Tylor introduced the modern concept of culture into anthropology in his *Primitive Culture*, 1871. The opening sentence of this book reads:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.³

Stocking points out that if Tylor did mean "culture" in its modern sense, historians of anthropology face a perplexing question: given Tylor's enormous influence, why was it thirty years before his conception of culture was adopted by other anthropologists? Stocking concludes that Tylor probably had in mind an older meaning of culture, connoting growth or progress. Tylor named his book

³ Tylor 1958[©1871], 1.

Primitive Culture, in the singular, and in this opening sentence clearly equates culture with civilization. Tylor was not really thirty years ahead of his time; later writers have imputed too modern an idea to him.⁴

This is not to deny that Tylor saw culture in something like its modern sense. The quotation shows that he did, particularly in the recognition that the complex whole is "acquired by man as a member of society." However, the main aim of his work was very different from that of later cultural anthropologists; he will only be misinterpreted if his use of culture is not distinguished. For Tylor the history of mankind represented evolution along a line from savagery to civilization. All human societies, past and present, could be placed somewhere on that line. Consequently, culture was a singular thing that evolved over time. Why some societies had progressed further than others was an issue, but it did not change the substantial fact: modern western society had evolved the furthest, while all other contemporary societies presented a picture of the west's past.

Tylor's meaning of culture may appear tangential to the economics of Thorstein Veblen. However, there are several connections between Stocking's story and the one I wish to tell. Firstly, the story of Tylor illustrates how

⁴ Stocking 1968, Chapter 4.

easily misunderstandings can arise if too little attention is paid to the historical context in which a writer is working. Tylor's work, like Veblen's, really embodies the movement from an earlier set of ideas to a later. The meaning of *culture* was evolving in anthropology at this time and Tylor's writing retains some of the older meaning while anticipating the newer meaning.

This story about Tylor is well enough appreciated in anthropology now. However, its importance for analyzing Veblen's work is only just reaching economics. It is commonly accepted that Veblen's uniqueness lay in his ability to apply the anthropological approach usually reserved for exotic cultures to modern western societies, and that Veblen may be considered the first economic anthropologist. If this is true, and no one appears to dispute it, then the next question is, "What is the anthropology Veblen was applying to his own society?" The meaning of his work will be very different if he was more like Boas or more like Tylor. Institutionalists seem to believe, at least implicitly, that he was more like Boas.⁵

Veblen was influenced by Tylor. He directly borrowed the concept of animism and embodied Tylor's idea of

⁵ For this conception of Veblen see, for example, Ayres 1958, Gruchy 1959, Hamilton 1992. On the relationship between Tylor's use of culture and Veblen's work see Jennings and Waller 1998, Mayhew 1998b.

cultural "survivals" in his own idea of institutions.⁶ But more importantly, Veblen began his own analysis of cultural change utilizing the evolutionary, *comparative method* employed not only by Tylor but also by Lewis Henry Morgan and Herbert Spencer, among many others. All of these writers influenced Veblen, although they all used the comparative method in slightly different ways. The purpose here is not so much to point to the influence of a particular writer, but to examine the implications of a particular approach to anthropology and history which was common enough during the nineteenth century, yet carried with it important implications about the cultural (and even biological) evolution of mankind. Whether he intended to or not, Veblen imported these implications into his own theory when he adopted the comparative method.

History of the Comparative Method.

Although Veblen insisted that his evolutionary scientific approach was 'modern' the stages of cultural evolution he employed were borrowed from much earlier. That societies varied from one another and changed over time had been a common idea in European thought since ancient times. However, the more proximate development of the evolutionary ideas Veblen was to use occurred among enlightenment

⁶ See, among others, Veblen 1914[©1964], Chapter 1; Edgell and Tilman 1989, 1004.

philosophers of the eighteen century, before Darwin, or even Lamarck produced theories of biological evolution.⁷

Through the extension of Cartesian principles to social studies, it became widely accepted that human knowledge advanced naturally, gradually, and inevitably towards perfection. By extension, the social order advanced in a similar manner. The history of Europe showed the social transformations that area had undergone and provided documentation for several hundred years. This data was hopelessly inadequate for tracing the progress of humanity backward towards humanity's original state. The classical literature filled in some of southern Europe's past, but there was a dearth of documentation for the north, which was particularly important as it was here, in the eighteenth century, that civilization had, then all then believed, reached its height. Fortunately, a solution to this lack of evidence seemed at hand.

During this period travel literature on antipodal man was piling up. These tribal societies seemed to exhibit a striking similarity to earlier European societies, and historians drew upon this information to fill the gaps in their own society's past. This 'conjectural history,' as Dugald Stewart named it, was based upon preconceptions of enlightenment philosophy about the Order of Nature that

⁷ See, for example, Harris 1968, 29-31.

transferred from the sciences the notion of a 'normal' or 'natural' sequence in events. From the uniformity of the laws of nature and the laws of human nature, social forms developed inevitably unless impeded by local or accidental circumstances. These impediments existed externally to the people in each group; they were environmental, not internal characteristics of people. Such impediments did result in the unequal progress of different human groups, so that the various societies existing in the contemporary world represented different stages in the progress of mankind.⁸

These stages were usually classified as something along the lines of savage, barbarian, and civilized, and the substitution of the contemporary state of one group into the history of another became named the comparative method. Taking these assumptions as axiomatic, it was possible to imagine the history of Europe by following societies backwards through time to an age when Europeans lived at the same stage of evolution as, say, the Patagonians. Adam Smith used this technique of reconstruction to show how, as Walter Bagehot later put it, "from being a savage, man rose to be a Scotchman."⁹

⁸ Stocking 1968, 114.

⁹ Quoted in Stocking 1968, 114.

The Psychic Unity of Mankind.

The comparative method was never entirely independent of contemporary speculations on the origin of races, and the two became increasingly intertwined in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, in the eighteenth century race was not taken as a causal factor in the different levels of progress along the evolutionary ladder. Indeed, for the comparative method to have any legitimacy, internal differences between human groups had to be explicitly denied. Thus was assumed the psychic unity of man.¹⁰ This claimed that "reason was the same in all men and equally possessed by all, regardless of differences of race."¹¹

Resort to the comparative method declined in the first half of the nineteenth century before enjoying a large resurgence in the 1860s. Biology played a substantial role in stimulating an intellectual environment that inspired evolutionary speculation, although the influence of Darwinism was often indirect. Spencer's evolutionary theorizing was not so much the application of biological evolution to society as the application of evolution to everything. In the Preface to *Primitive Culture*, Tylor expressly denied the direct influence of Darwin or Spencer,

¹⁰ This expression is of more recent origin, being attributed to Adolf Bastian in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹¹ Stocking 1968, 115.

seeing his own work as "arranged on its own lines, coming scarcely into contact of detail with the previous works of these eminent philosophers."¹² Morgan first resisted Darwin's theory on religious grounds, but later felt "compelled" to adopt it. He then proceeded to supply biological explanations for several cultural phenomena, such as exogamy, sleeping in the nude, and the lack of desire for economic gain.¹³

All three adapted the comparative method to suit their different purposes and in so doing changed the meaning of psychic unity. In fact, the evolutionary stages in their work can be interpreted as showing the mental evolution of mankind.¹⁴ Spencer breaks most explicitly with the eighteenth century. His Lamarckian mechanisms for evolution produced structural changes in the brain, so that civilized humans were not only culturally advanced they were also biologically superior to savages and barbarians. For Spencer it was not human nature that remained the same over time but the "laws of thought."¹⁵ Spencer spent much time speculating on the differences between early and late human nature.

¹² Tylor, 1958, "Preface" to the Second Edition.

¹³ Malefijt 1974, 149, Harris 1968, 137-140.

¹⁴ Stocking 1968, 115-7. The same may be said of Veblen's evolutionary stages.

¹⁵ Spencer 1896, Vol. I, 100.

Morgan and Tylor took a different and narrower approach to evolutionary theory than Spencer. Nevertheless, they did not entirely escape the influence of biology and its growing connection with race. Morgan explicitly denied a role for biological evolutionary in cultural growth. However, it seems he carried an implicit idea that cultural evolution caused a change in the structure of the brain itself. Hence humans shared a mental unity at similar cultural stages, thus leaving the mental unity of humanity as potential only.

Tylor stayed closest to the eighteenth century conception of psychic unity, at least initially. In *Primitive Culture* he argued that the process of reasoning was the same among the primitives and the civilized; it was the premises from which the reasoning started that were different. That is, the primitive reasoned soundly from false premises and consequently reached wrong conclusions. As knowledge increased premises became sounder. However, even in *Primitive Culture* he hinted that the differences might have a structural basis. By the time he published *Anthropology* in 1899 he expressly connected greater intelligence with the then misread brain size of white Europeans.¹⁶

It is in this cultural evolutionary environment

¹⁶ Harris 1968, 140; Stocking 1968, 83 and 115.

created by the work of Tylor, Morgan and Spencer that Veblen received his education and commenced his own academic work. While Veblen differs from each of them, he borrowed from all to build his own theory and their influence is very clear through to the First World War. But even before Veblen began putting this evolutionary theory to work, the assault had begun that was to discredit cultural evolution for half a century.

Franz Boas had commenced his criticism of cultural evolution in the 1880s, although its collapse is usually connected to his 1896 paper, "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology."¹⁷ Boas denied any validity to cultural stages and proposed the particularist study of individual cultures and a diffusionist approach to cultural similarities.

The speed with which cultural evolution collapsed to be replaced by the Boasian approach amounts to something like a Kuhnian paradigm change. Soon after Veblen had published *The Leisure Class* the cultural stages he had taken from Morgan were abandoned wholesale in cultural anthropology.¹⁸ Veblen persisted with the cultural stages, employing them again in *The Instinct of Workmanship*,

¹⁷ Boas 1940[©1896], 270-280.

¹⁸ Leslie White, who had more reason to play down the speed with which the evolutionary perspective collapsed than exaggerate it, dated the collapse in the USA to 1904, in France to 1908 and in England to 1911. See White 1987.

although a diffusionist element becomes much more prominent in his work around this time, before anthropology dropped into the background altogether.¹⁹

History of Race Theory

Background on Race

In addition to the comparative method in the late eighteenth century, there developed a related though distinct line of speculation on the anthropological history of mankind, the origins of race. Indeed, debates over race supersede the comparative method in the first half of the next century and became, at that time, the main subject matter of anthropology.

The divergent meanings of 'race' make it a problematic term when examining writers on social topics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Zoology it denoted a variety of a species or a subspecies, which is Darwin's meaning of the term in the subtitle to the first edition of *The Origin of Species: The Preservation of*

¹⁹ The Boasian assault on evolution, while devastating, showed little concern for the accurate depiction of evolutionary beliefs. See White 1987, chapters 1-8; Harris 1968, chapters 6 and 7. Veblen was in a different position to the followers of Tylor and Morgan as his main interest was modern, industrial economies, although the decline in Veblen's use of exotic cultures after 1900 may have been prompted by this shift in beliefs among anthropologists. From about 1916 Veblen side-stepped most of these questions by focusing his attention almost exclusively on recent history and current events in the industrial economies. The next generation of Institutionalists did not develop Veblen's evolutionary approach; its revival in economics roughly coincided with its revival in anthropology after World War II. See Rutherford 1998, Mayhew 1998b.

Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life. In social analysis it might mean no more than those people who share a common language, or live within a geographical region, or are part of the same nation. However, it was frequently used in a biological sense, but often when discussing what today would be called cultural phenomena, as it was increasingly accepted throughout the nineteenth century that culture and biology were linked. So, when race is used a writer might mean it as either purely biologically or purely culturally, or as some combination of the two.²⁰ It is not until the beginning of the twentieth century that a systematic distinction between biological inheritance and cultural tradition became widely recognized; of course, this connection between 'biology' and behavior still has advocates today, as in, for example, *The Bell Curve*.

Enlightenment philosophers who speculated on the cultural history of mankind felt little constraint to bring their speculations into line with pronouncements in the Bible. Nevertheless, their general acceptance of the psychic unity of mankind could easily accord with the

²⁰ In his early work Veblen's use of race might be taken as ambiguous in this way, as also is his use of 'ethnic type.' The problems of distinguishing biology from culture are confounded in any writer, such as Veblen, who used Lamarckian evolution. With that theory it is generally impossible to tell where biology ends and culture starts, whether or not the writer makes use of race as a concept. When Veblen dropped Lamarckism for mutation theory these ambiguities went away. At the beginning of *Imperial Germany*, published in 1915, Veblen unequivocally states that race is a biological category.

accepted belief that the whole of mankind descended from Adam and Eve. However, the influx of anthropological evidence into Europe pointed to the enormous diversity of mankind, both in appearance and behavior, raising troubling questions about biblical accounts. In 1774, Henry Holmes, Lord Kames, raised the question that entirely occupied anthropology for the next eighty years. Starting from the belief in divine creation, could the existing diversity of mankind be explained by descent from a single original pair, or was it more likely that the different races of mankind were the product of multiple creations? Kames concluded that while the evidence pointed to the latter conclusion, this was unacceptable to true Christians as it conflicted with the biblical account.²¹ Unacceptable as this conclusion might be, many people had no difficulty accepting it and a long debate blew up whose ripples can still be felt today.

The monogenists believed in a single creation, the polygenists believed in multiple creations. All the evidence seemed to support the polygenists' account, the only troubling discrepancy being with the Bible. Indeed, the polygenist account seemed the only one that could explain the existing diversity. How could this enormous physical and cultural diversity be brought into harmony

²¹ See Harris 1968, 87-88; Stocking 1968, 44-45.

with a single pair of progenitors, particularly as the biblical evidence, based on the life of the prophets, dated the Earth as only six thousand years old.

In attempting to answer these questions some monogenists' thinking was directed along evolutionary lines, both cultural and biological. At least one prominent monogenist, James Cowles Prichard, was led to speculations that anticipated Darwinism to some degree. However, Prichard and other writers possessed no clear conception of 'race' as a biological concept and they confounded biological and cultural factors as identifying characteristics. Prichard, for example, spent much time studying physical characteristics but ultimately hoped to establish the unity of mankind by uncovering a common origin for all languages, predating the confusion at the Tower of Babel. This, at least in Prichard's case, was not a foolish confusion. Given the question he was trying to answer and the biblical accounts on which he based his work, a common origin for all languages was as much a way to confirm the unity of mankind as any physical trait. Prichard also presented a novel interpretation of the origins of mankind. Christian Europeans, whether monogenist or polygenist, believed they had descended from a white Adam and Eve. Prichard speculated that Adam and Eve were probably black and that the white race was the evolutionary result of a constant lightening through a process of sexual

selection. This theory comes very close to Darwin's explanation of racial distinctions presented in *The Descent of Man*.²² Prichard also pointed to adaptation to different physical environments as a source of racial diversity, a belief that Darwin did not share.

As we have seen, the cultural evolutionary theory employed by Morgan and Tylor had its basis in the eighteenth century. Similarly the debate over racial origins show that evolutionary arguments were a commonplace in western social thought long before Darwin or even Spencer began to write. When Lamarck's biology is added all the ingredients are available for Herbert Spencer's synthetic philosophy. What is important is not that these evolutionary ideas were pre-Darwin, but that exactly the same type of issues survived into the post-Darwin period and made up the bulk of the social Darwinist debates of the late nineteenth century. Despite their pedigree, Darwinism allowed them to be recast in line with 'modern' scientific beliefs. Penniman claims that Darwinism ended the old "sterile debate between monogenists and polygenists."²³ In fact, most of the issues survived

²² Malefijt 1974 266-8; Penniman 1965, 62. Malefijt argues that the two theories are so similar that Darwin could not have developed his own independently.

²³ Penniman 1965, 83.

Darwinism, little changed in substance, and became embroiled in the debates of social Darwinists. The two sides in the debate on human unity really embodied the two views on human behavior as being due to nature or due to nurture that developed in the second half the nineteenth century as physical and cultural anthropology.²⁴

Physical Anthropology, 1850-1900.

Physical anthropology underwent very little development in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century following the demise of Morton's 'American School.' Anyone interested in the scientific study of the topic had to refer to the work of the continental Europeans, particularly the French. Much of this work concentrated on attempting to distinguish the races of Europe by anthropometric measurement, and speculation on the correlation between the physical and behavioral features of race. This work was of interest to Veblen because it built upon the connection between biological traits and the achievements of the European peoples including their creation of the modern industrial system and science. Veblen's own writings are littered with passing references to these writers as well as extensive

²⁴ Penniman 1965, 73. Stocking 1968, 55-6.

discussions of the racial composition of Europe and its settlements.²⁵

The Three Races of Europe

I. Broca and Topinard

The widely held belief in the last half of the nineteenth century was that the modern European population was a hybrid compiled from three original and distinct races. This belief had a long heritage that went back to the writings of Julius Caesar. This presumption was organized in a more scientific manner in the 1850s by Pierre Paul Broca, who is considered the founder of physical anthropology and of anthropology in France. Although Broca had a broad vision for anthropology embracing disciplines from chemistry to linguistics, his main influence was on anthropometry as a means for identifying race.

Like many of the European physical anthropologists Broca initially trained in medicine. He began as a polygenist and believed in the fixity of species. After the publication of *The Origin of Species* he became a convert to

²⁵ Veblen cites Lapouge, Veblen 1990i[©1898], 56; Deniker, 'Sergi, and Ridgeway, Veblen 1990d[©1913], 467, 461, 457; TBE Lapouge, Ripley, Keane, Veblen 1973b[©1904], 304, n. 2; Ammon and Lapouge, Veblen 1964b[©1914] 17, n. 1. See also Veblen 1990b[©1904], 497; Veblen 1939[©1915], 281; Veblen 1975[©1899] especially Chapters 8 and 9. For extensive discussions of race theory in Veblen's work see citations at Footnote 32.

evolution, but with reservations. Following from the work of phrenologists, Broca believed that the most important identifying characteristics for a race were the shape and size of the brain and skull. Consequently, he spent much time developing systematic measuring techniques and measuring instruments, based upon the cephalic index. Broad distinctions could be drawn between races by color alone, but when classifying the secondary divisions of races the cephalic index was the best guide. When this was ambiguous, resort might be had to pigmentation and stature. These European races were classified as the dolichocephalic blond, most prevalent in Northern Europe and variously designated as Nordic, Teutonic, Aryan, German; a brachycephalic brunet, the Alpine, dominant through the middle; and a dolichocephalic brunet, the Mediterranean, in Southern European.

In general, four major beliefs were held by the European physical anthropologists who followed Broca:

1. Cultural differences were the product of racial, physical structure.
2. The current distinguishing differences between races were virtually primordial.
3. Most important differences were in the skull and brain.
4. From modern heterogeneity, original racial types could be reconstructed.

Paul Topinard (1830-1911), who was Broca's heir in

French anthropology, articulated all of these beliefs. Along with most racial theorists Topinard initially believed that the members of a "pure" race were united by some manner of extra-physical racial "essence," and that a kind of "ideal type" (in Plato's sense) of the original pure races could be recovered from beneath the present, motley patchwork. This the data refused to confirm. So, unable to find a pure representative of the presumed races Topinard came up with the notion of a *racial type*. This type, who was some statistical average of the physical characteristics of a population, would represent a race; and these morphological characteristics also corresponded to psychological characteristics.²⁶ Alas, in step with the continue accumulation of evidence the *type* followed the *pure* into the mists. Actual Europeans refused to conform to the model. Now the racial type became the "ideal type" to which the actual population was assumed to approximate.

In the bazaar environment of European racial thought at this time Paul Topinard deserves some credit for his refusal to ignore the facts. They troubled him, and he became increasingly agnostic about the likelihood of ever confirming the truth of European racial heritage. But his case also demonstrates the tenacity of ideas. Despite the

²⁶ Topinard said, "Race in the present state of things is an abstract concept, a notion of continuity in discontinuity, of unity in diversity. It is the rehabilitation of a real but directly unattainable thing," quoted in Ripley 1899a, 111.

vast amount of opposing evidence Topinard knew that the European population had descended from three original and pure races, and he could see that the members of the existing population corresponded to one or other of the three racial types.²⁷

II. Anthropo-Sociologists

Other anthropologists found the facts far less troubling than did Topinard. Following on the racial theories of the Count Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau and the physical anthropology of Broca and Topinard, a school of European social Darwinism called anthropo-sociology (or "selectionist") developed, whose leading exponents were Otto Ammon and Georges Vacher de Lapouge.²⁸

The anthropo-sociologists combined Gobineau's ideas of racial superiority with the Darwinian idea of selection. However, they believed that the social progress of humanity had moved it beyond the simple process of natural selection to that of "social selection," whereby environment that performed the selection was no longer 'Nature' but society. Six social forces had largely replaced Nature in the selection process: military, political, religious, moral,

²⁷ "By *human type* must be understood the average of characters which a human race supposed to be pure presents," Topinard 1878, 446. See also Penniman 1965, 89-91; Stocking 1968, 56-59.

²⁸ See Gorbineau 1967[©1854]; Hankin 1931, Part I, Chapters III and V; Clark 1984, Chapter 9.

legal, and economic. The unit of selection on which these forces worked was the "racial" or "ethnic" type.

Anthropo-sociologists rejected the possibility of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, claiming instead to model their own theory on Darwinism. Nonetheless, their theory deviated from Darwinism in two important respects. First, they treated the ethnic types as immutable. The process of social selection did not act on any biological variations that appeared within an ethnic type. Rather it changed society by changing the relative numbers of each ethnic type within the population. Second, this process produced the opposite result to Darwinian theory. In Darwin's theory, nature selected those organisms that were better adapted to the prevailing environment. In this sense the survivors in the struggle could be said to be the fittest. In the anthropo-sociologists' theory, social selection worked against the supposedly superior ethnic type in favor of its 'inferior' competitors.²⁹

The foundations for anthropo-sociology were developed independently at first by Ammon in Germany and by Lapouge in France. Germany Otto Ammon began his work by measuring the heads of army recruits in the Grand Duchy of Baden. From this and subsequent research Ammon discovered a

²⁹ See Closson 1896. Among the marks of racial superiority are a greater tax-paying capacity and a greater tendency to ride bicycles. Closson 1897. (Hierarchy of European Races)

correlation between social status and head size. The dolichocephalic Aryan represented the dominant class and the brachycephalic the inferior. In relation to this he had also noticed what became known as Ammon's Law: city dwellers and migrants to the cities were predominantly dolichocephalic.

In France, Lapouge reached similar conclusions on the hierarchy of the European races. At the top stood the Nordic dolichocephalic, *Homo Europæus*, who was brave, blond, dashing and Protestant. Next came the *Homo Alpinus*, brachycephalic, brown, quiet, and Catholic, who liked to sit on his own land and obey the government.³⁰ At the bottom, among Europeans, was the short, dark, mesocephalic Mediterranean. Paradoxically, and to the anthropo-sociologists' dismay, by some perverse, biological version of Gresham's Law, the dashing blond was being driven out in the struggle for survival by their inferior, darker neighbors.³¹ Lapouge's solution was to create a Nordic elite and inbreed. Lapouge's conclusions here are very similar to those of the eugenisists, who also believed that the best elements in society were being overrun by the worst and

³⁰ Lapouge followed the designations of the great taxonomist, Carl Linnaeus. He also followed the common practice of identifying the dolicho blond with the Aryan, with the proviso that he intended this as a zoological, not a linguistic classification; see Hawkins 1997, 193.

³¹Lapouge actually use the metaphor of Gresham's law.

that the solution was selective breeding. Lapouge considered the work of the eugenisists, particularly Francis Galton, to be most akin to the work of anthropo-sociologists.³²

The persistence of belief in the three races of Europe provides a striking example of the resilience of 'truth' in the face of facts. Certainly, adequate data was assembled to test the three-race theory. Between 1859 and 1889 twenty five million Europeans were subjected to anthropometric testing, with the anthropo-sociologists being especially zealous in collecting and presenting statistical data. Nevertheless, when William Z. Ripley asked Otto Ammon for a photograph of a pure Alpine type from the Black Forest, Ammon was unable to deliver; "He had measured thousands of heads, and yet he answered that he really had not been able to find a perfect specimen in all details. All his round-headed men were either blond, or tall, or narrow-nosed, or something else that they ought not to be."³³ Here was the rub: the more evidence accumulated, the more questionable

³² For the use of these theories in Veblen's work see *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, especially Chapters 8 and 9; "The Mutation Theory and the Blond Race;" "The Blond Race and the Aryan Culture;" "An Early Experiment in Trusts;" "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science;" *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*; "The Instinct of Workmanship and the Icksomeness of Labour;" *The Instinct of Workmanship and The State of the Industrial Arts*. Veblen begins "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" with a quote from Lapouge, which should raise questions of what Veblen meant by "evolutionary."

³³ Ripley 1899, 108; also Stocking 1968, 58.

the assumption of three races. Some tried to account for the endless deviation and combination of physical characteristics by extending the number of races: Keane saw six, Deniker ten.³⁴

If the empirical evidence convinced Topinard that the reality of racial essence and type were dissipating, others imagined they could see through the confusion of facts to the reality of the pure races that lay beneath. Ammon and Lapouge had no doubts about the value of 'facts' and how they stacked up, and these 'truths' of racial types were passed on to Americans in the 1890s.

In the 1890s, if Americans were to follow the developments in physical anthropology they had to turn to the Europeans. Few did, as in the racial debates of the post bellum era the Europeans were only repeating the things white Americans already believed. However, one who found the European anthropo-sociology seductive was Carlos Closson. Here the link between Veblen and a particular set of ideas is remarkably clear. Between his days as an undergraduate at Harvard and his later life as a realtor on the west coast, Closson was an instructor of economics at the University of Chicago. Hired to teach the theory courses Closson spent most of his intellectual energy on translating and expounding the theories of the European

³⁴ A. H. Keane *Man: Past and Present*, 1899; J. Deniker *Races of Man*, 1901.

anthropo-sociologists for the American audience. One particular outlet for these ideas was the University's *Journal of Political Economy*, edited at this time by one T. B. Veblen.³⁵

The most influential book on European physical anthropology published during this period was *The Races of Europe* 1899, by William Z. Ripley. Ripley began his career as a sociologist before becoming a well-known economist. His book was really a summary of the findings of European anthropology from Broca and Topinard to Ammon and Lapouge.³⁶ Ripley subtitled the work *A Sociological Study* and paid attention to environment and cultural factors. However, at the bottom, differences in race accounted for the different characters and achievements of the European population.³⁷ Veblen drew upon this book for his later work, and it provided the foundation for the classic American statement

³⁵ Dorfman 1934, 126-7; Stocking 1968, 60-1. At this time 'racial' issues were being discussed extensively in the economic journals, under the 'negro problem' and mass immigration of 'inferior' European races into the United States. The only racial articles published in the *Journal of Political Economy* during Veblen's tenure as editor were five by Carlos Closson (one a translation of Lapouge) on anthropo-sociology. Closson's other main outlet was the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. See Cherry 1976, 149.

³⁶ Ripley published separate an extensive bibliography of the literature on this topic, Ripley 1899b.

³⁷ Although Ripley claimed to place more emphasis on the affects of the environment he had the same essentialist attitude as Topinard (and the selectionists). Even if the data itself could not confirm the reality of race "it exists for us never the less" 1899, 118. See also Ripley's criticism of anthropo-sociologists' emphasis on race [Ripley 1900] and Closson's rejoinder [Closson 1900b].

of Aryan anthropology, Madison Grant's *The Passing of The Great Race: The Racial Basis for European History*, (1915).

Compared with the received histories of economics, Veblen's use of race may seem very idiosyncratic. The role of race in Veblen's work will be examined in detail later, but it may be said here that around the turn of the century nearly every social scientist in the United States, including economists, believed that distinctions between races were real and accounted, at least in part, for differences in behavior.³⁸ Veblen did share the common prejudices although, far from being an extremist in this respect, he was very moderate. Veblen denied the myths behind Aryan anthropology, denied the truth of a racial hierarchy, and was hostile to eugenics.³⁹ The economics journals of the 1890s and early 1900s are full of discussions of the detrimental effects of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and the Negro problem. A striking example is *Race Traits and the Tendencies of the American Negro*, 1896, written by Frederick L. Hoffman, a man on the leading edge of neo-Darwinist racial extremism. Hoffman provided evidence for the "degeneration" of the African-American race since the end of slavery, and

³⁸ Even Franz Boas, who did so much to undermine the biologicistic foundations of social science, began his career measuring the heads of immigrants as an indicator of their intelligence.

³⁹ Unlike Irving Fisher, who was an active, life-long member of the American Eugenics Society.

advocated the strict separation of the races. This book became the most talked about work on race to appear in America for several decades. Hoffman was actually a statistician with the Prudential Insurance Company, not an economist. Nevertheless, his ideas were not too out of line with the general beliefs held by economists, as the book was published and circulated by the American Economics Association.⁴⁰

Evolutionary Biology: Lamarck, Darwin, & Mendel⁴¹

When Veblen called for an evolutionary economics early in his academic career, 'he described it as post-Darwinian. Whether he intended the association with biological evolution to be taken as purely metaphorical or to some degree literally, there were actually two alternative theories of biological evolution being applied in social analysis at that time, both of which Veblen employed in his own writings. One was Darwinism, the other an earlier theory developed by Jean Baptiste Lamarck.

⁴⁰ See Cherry 1976 and 1980, for extended discussions on the widespread uses of race and biology among economists at this time. Racial arguments were particularly popular with Irving Fisher, Frank Fetter, and Prescott Hall, but even John Commons made use of them.

⁴¹ The following discussion of theories of biological evolution is based on Mayr 1982 and Bowler 1989.

I. Lamarck

After a successful military career Lamarck (1744-1829) dedicated himself to science, which yielded him little reward during his lifetime, in either fame or fortune. Like many scientists at the end of the eighteenth century, Lamarck considered that the geological evidence contradicted the natural history of the Earth as presented in the Bible. To him it showed that the Earth was possibly millions of years old and that it had undergone dramatic, if slow, environmental changes. In addition, the fossil record indicated to Lamarck that species were not stable, as was generally believed; they changed over time. Similarities between many extinct and living species could be explained better by the one species developing out of the other, rather than them being two distinct species one of which had died out. Tying these different threads together, Lamarck surmised that if the earth had undergone major environmental changes over long periods of time all species would have become extinct unless they could adapt to changing conditions. This ability to adapt to altered circumstances would produce new variations and new species.

To explain these transformations Lamarck employed the widely held belief that acquired characteristics could be inherited. Adaptation required a new emphasis among body functions: some organs would now be used more and some less. Those used more would develop and these developments

were passed on to offspring; those used less would gradually whither and could lose their purpose altogether. As the environment changed, those organisms that could adapt would survive and reproduce, the rest would die. Lamarck published this theory in *Zoological Philosophy*, 1809, half a century before the appearance of Darwinism.⁴²

II. Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) first published his own theory of evolution in 1859 as *The Origin of Species: Or The Survival of Races in the Struggle for Existence*, although he originally formulated the theory twenty years earlier after reading Thomas Malthus' *Population*. Malthus argued that population increased in a geometric ratio while the food supply increased in an arithmetic ratio. Consequently, population would tend to outstrip the available food supply. Famine would be the inevitable result if no other mechanism intervened first to bring food and mouths back into balance. Darwin knew this argument could not hold for nature as a whole as each species acted as food for others. However, every species did produce many more progeny than could possibly survive to reproduce, so there ensued a struggle for existence. He also recognized that within each species and subspecies enormous variety

⁴² Lamarck 1963[1809]; Bowler 1986, 61-2, and 1989, 82-9.

existed among individuals. On reading Malthus Darwin suddenly realized that any variation favorable to a creature in this struggle for existence would tend to be retained and reproduced in offspring. In a sense, nature would 'select' favorable traits in a manner analogous to a stockbreeder or horticulturist. *Natural selection* favored particular traits, so individuals with those traits would multiply. Over enormous periods of time the gradual accumulation of these minor, favorable variation would eventually result in new subspecies and eventually new species.

Darwin was cautious about using the expression natural selection as it suggested conscious choice being made by anthropomorphic Nature, when he wanted to stress that this process worked in terms of material cause and effect. Similarly, he meant favorable only in the relative sense that it benefited the individual in the struggle to obtain food and reproduce. Darwin did not want to imply any sense of moral superiority or of teleological trend in this process. In Darwin's conception natural selection was the important component of his theory. The variations that occurred in individuals of a species supplied the raw materials on which Nature worked. Evolution then occurred as a corollary to natural selection.⁴³

⁴³ Himmelfarb 1959, 345. "Evolution" and "survival of the fittest" were expressions popularized by Herbert Spencer. Darwin was unhappy

III. Lamarckism and Darwinism Compared

Significant differences existed between the theories of Darwin and Lamarck. Lamarckism emphasized individual adaptation to a changing environment; Darwinism, selection among individuals of the same species, where changing environmental conditions were of secondary importance.⁴⁴ Lamarckism relied on the inheritance of acquired traits, Darwinism on the appearance of variety. Both Darwin and Lamarck were hampered by lack of explanations for inheritance. Lamarckism could not explain how acquired traits could be inherited, nor Darwinism how variations arose in the first place. A second major difficulty with Darwin's theory concerned how progeny inherited parental traits. In Darwin's time it was believed that the traits of parents became blended in offspring, which raised a problem for natural selection. If minor variations occurred, for some unknown reason, in an individual member of a species, and if parental traits blended in offspring, any new trait would be quickly swamped when crossed with the established traits of a species, no matter how beneficial it might be for survival. It was not until the rediscovery of Mendel's work and the growth of genetics that questions of inheritance could begin to be answered.

with both expressions although he used them more frequently in later editions of his work. Darwin preferred "descent with modification" and "natural selection." Hodgson 1992, 1993.

⁴⁴ Bowler 1989, 173.

Although Darwinism finally displaced Lamarckism in evolutionary biology it was by no means clear which was the better theory until the 1920s. Lamarckism enjoyed an enormous boost from the work of Herbert Spencer, who made extensive use of the inheritance of acquired traits in his sociobiological theories. In the 1870s and '80s Spencer's reputation equaled Darwin's, and even superseded it in America.⁴⁵ Darwin himself became less 'Darwinian' as he tried to respond to criticisms of his theory that mounted over the years. In *The Descent of Man*, 1871, he placed sexual selection as the most important process in the evolution of humanity, dropping natural selection into second place. In later editions of *Origin* he resorted to Lamarckian explanations to support evolution, and appealed to the correlation of organs, direct action of the environment, and one other important, but unspecified cause, to explain gaps in his theory. He also implied in places that natural selection applied to the group rather than the individual, which went against the basis of his argument in the *Origin* that was cast entirely in terms of struggle among individuals.⁴⁶

Neither Lamarck nor Darwin applied their theories to social evolution, although Darwin made passing comments on

⁴⁵ Hofstadter 1955, Chapter 2.

⁴⁶ Himmelfarb, 1959, 343.

particular topics. Both theories had significant gaps in their explanations for biological evolution, which were not resolved when they were adapted to social phenomena. In fact, their shortcomings were compounded, although it was this that made them so adaptable. Evolutionary theory, of one kind or another, seemed capable of explaining, and justifying, any social arrangement as a result of the struggle for survival, whether it was the superiority of individuals in making money or war, or the superiority of groups as classes, nations, or races.⁴⁷

Although Darwinism has become the accepted theory for evolution, Lamarckism has never entirely disappeared from biology. In the social sciences it has proved more tenacious, where it appears to provide a more useful, metaphorical model than Darwinism for the transmission of cultural traits.

IV. Mendel and Mutation Theory

Johann Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) was an Austrian monk and botanist whose experiments on peas were to give birth to the science of genetics. Mendel had begun his experiment even before the publication of *The Origin of Species*. He discovered several things that were to have important implications for human genetics and prove useful to Veblen in his own work.

⁴⁷ Hawkins 1997, Chapter 1.

In his breeding of peas Mendel found that offspring inherited distinct traits--'unit characters'--intact from parents. This contradicted the earlier theory that parental traits were 'blended' in offspring, which had caused trouble for Darwin's theory. 'Dominant' traits appeared in offspring, while 'recessive' traits did not appear, although they were retained, not lost, and could re-emerge under certain conditions. This supplied an explanation for the commonly observed, yet puzzling fact that physical traits of grandparents or more distant ancestors might suddenly reappear in progeny. Blending theory could not explain this atavism.⁴⁸

Mendel also found that new types of peas, ones with new and distinct traits, appeared suddenly as mutations not through a slow process of accumulation of minor variations. These new varieties, unlike most variations, were stable. They did not disappear if the mutant was crossed back on the parent. Mendel's published his findings in an obscure, local scientific journal under the title "*Versuchen uber Pflanzenhbriden*," 1865 and their significance was completely missed.⁴⁹

In 1900 Mendel's work was rediscovered simultaneously

⁴⁸ Darwin had toyed with the idea that offspring inherited distinct traits from parents though he never developed it. See Penniman 1965, 77.

⁴⁹ After Darwin died a copy of Mendel's paper was discovered in his library, unopened.

by three scientists, one of whom was the Dutch botanist Hugo De Vries. De Vries continued Mendel's experiments and confirmed his results, including the appearance of stable mutations. He also attempted to create a permanent change in type by selection from already-existing variations, and found he could not. He did succeed in producing a kernel of corn with extra rows of ears, but it persisted only so long as he practiced selection, it then reverted to its normal condition. De Vries could not produce new stable traits by selection.⁵⁰

The findings of Mendel and De Vries offered mutation as a new explanation for evolution and initially raised doubts about natural selection. If a new species appeared through a discrete leap, what was the contribution of a theory that relied on the accumulation of minor variations and where was the need for the struggle for existence or the survival of the fittest? This apparent conflict between the two theories was not resolved until the merging of natural selection and genetics in the neo-Darwinian synthesis of the 1940s.

Although Mendel's work was not available to nineteenth century theorists, including Veblen when he wrote *The Leisure Class*, its rediscovery carried important implications for human evolution and the origin of races which Veblen found useful for his own work.

⁵⁰ Himmelfarb 1959, 310-312.

Chapter III

VEBLEN'S EARLY PUBLICATIONS ON EVOLUTION.

Veblen wrote a large number of book reviews and articles during the 1890s on various aspects of social thought. As was fairly typical of his career, he wandered over a diverse range of topics--from woman's dress to Spencer's social theory onto Bohm-Bawerk's theory of capital--and, if Veblen can be described as an 'economist' at this time, his inspiration clearly did not derive from the classical tradition. In a series of interrelated works published in 1898-99 Veblen set down the direction for his own brand of economics.

With the publication of his celebrated article "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" in 1898, Veblen's life work becomes defined. This article can be taken as Veblen's evolutionary manifesto and its title question has been repeated by institutional economists for the last century. Following this article Veblen published a series of three related papers in successive issues of the *American Journal of Sociology*, and then his first book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. These works are all interrelated, with the three papers providing "a more

explicit statement of the theoretical position" underlying the book.¹

Ownership and the Status of Women

As the first practical statement for the new evolutionary economics this body of work diverges significantly from the standard theory of either the classical or socialist economists. Its first impression is that Veblen's theory has little to do with modern economic matters. Veblen sweeps over the entire history of mankind from the very beginnings of humanity to contemporary preferences for hats. He spends much of his time in the distant past discussing the various traits of savages and barbarians, and these discussions draw mostly upon anthropological data, particularly as presented by Spencer in *Sociology*. However, as Joseph Dorfman frequently observed, all of Veblen's writings were directed towards the current state of economic relations, no matter how distant from these matters they initially appeared.

In Veblen's view modern economic relations could be divided into those that were productive and those that were predacious. The institutional structures that made up the current cultural scheme of the occidental world were likewise and necessarily shaped by these relations. While the modern scheme had evolved its own unique features most

¹ Veblen 1975[©1899], "Preface."

of its characteristics were survivals out of past. Veblen's aim in these early papers and in *The Leisure Class* was to explain how the institutions associated with industry and exploit had emerged in mankind's past, survived down to the present day, and taken on their modern forms.

The duration of the modern, "civilized" regime had been relatively short so it was difficult as yet to identify its distinctive features and the general trend of its institutions; all of these institutions, however, were extensively colored by the past savage and barbarian schemes of life. In a general sense, Veblen's view of existing institutions was akin to Darwin's view of species: their current form resulted from the gradual accretion of variety, such that they were distinct from their distant ancestors yet still bore the family resemblance.

The occidental peoples were the only ones whose culture had evolved sufficiently to be considered as moving beyond the barbarian stage of cultural growth into the modern era. But this transformation was underway, not complete, so modern institutions were still too imbued by the barbarian animus for their distinctive characteristics to be predicted with any degree of certainty. However, western societies, and most others, had completed the transition from savagery to barbarism, so the distinct institutional characteristics of these two cultural stages were historically complete and the causes of the transition

between the two might be analyzed. The details of this transition were largely speculative, but through the comparative method Veblen could call upon contemporary data from non-Western societies to elaborate the gaps in Western history.

Veblen's main focus of this set of writings is this period of transition from savagery to barbarism. Much of the discussion appears as fairly straight forward cultural anthropology, typically concerned with the peculiar institutions of primitive peoples, either extant or those of historical Europeans. Veblen's purpose though, like that of many of the other evolutionary anthropologists of the time, was not to examine the oddities of primitive society but to explain how the oddities of modern society had their origins in these older institutional forms. "The Beginnings of Ownership" and "The Barbarian Status of Women" provide clear examples. In these articles Veblen elaborates upon a conversation begun by John McLennan in his *Primitive Marriage* and continued by Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Sociology*. Veblen began with the theory that wife capture had its origin in barbarian males seizing women from hostile tribes to display as trophies of their own war-like prowess. Veblen then examined the economic implications of this activity and concluded that private property (personal wealth), the foundation for the leisure class (exemption from productive labor), and the

patriarchal household had a common origin in the violent seizure of women.

The role of biology and biological evolution is not evident in most of the articles published during this period. Only in one of these articles and in two chapters in *The Leisure Class* does Veblen explicitly address biology and evolution directly and at some length. However, in light of the discussions presented in those places his other writings of this period take on a different hue. This change of color often emerges through placing different emphasis or alternative meaning on words.

Through metaphorical use most of the words which appear in biological evolution have alternative, non-biological meanings. Evolution and inheritance, for example, originally had non-biological meanings. In its Latin etymology, evolution meant unfolding, as of a scroll. Herbert Spencer, not Charles Darwin, popularized the word as a description of biological change. Inheritance originally meant the passing on of chattels to the next generation, and later came to mean the process of generation itself. Many words have also passed the other way. Words commonly employed by economists, such as growth, capital, pecuniary were adopted from biological usage.² In most cases the literal and metaphorical usage of words is

² See Hodgson 1993, Chapter 3; Sahlins 1976.

easily identified through usage and context. There would be little confusion of meaning between "he inherited his mother's good looks," and "she inherited her mother's house;" nor between "man evolved from the apes" and "Imperial Germany evolved from the Holy Roman Empire." Alternatively, statements such as "the war-like traits that had evolved among the Vikings were inherited by their offspring" could support a number of interpretations. If stated today, this would most likely be taken in the cultural sense. If stated in the second half of the nineteenth century, its literal meaning would be far from certain. It might be meant entirely culturally or entirely biologically. For anyone consciously accepting a Lamarckian mechanism, as did Spencer, it might be a combination of the two, in any possible proportions. Also prevalent in the 1890s was a type of implicit Lamarckism. Some one making such a statement might not be able to say exactly what process was at work. The statement might even support a Darwinian interpretation.

Because of this simple confusion over the meaning of words it is frequently difficult to tell at the end of the twentieth century if a nineteenth century writer is speaking of a cultural or a biological process. Veblen is usually taken as a cultural evolutionist and hence as using

most biological expression metaphorically.³ My purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate that, in line with the influences outlined in the last chapter, Veblen intended his evolution as more than metaphorical.

To show how seemingly cultural arguments might conceal an alternate or perhaps complementary meaning consider the two related anthropological articles "The Beginnings of Ownership" and "The Barbarian Status of Women," published in consecutive additions of the *American Journal of Sociology* in November 1898 and January 1899 respectively. Here, Veblen indulges one of his abiding passions: attacking socio-economic arguments based on natural law and *speculative history*--a method Veblen called "rationalist" history.

Veblen's main target is that ownership rests in some sense on an individual's productivity:

Not only is the productive labor of the owner the definitive ground of his ownership today, but the derivation of the institution of property is similarly traced to the productive labor of that putative savage hunter who produced two deer or one beaver or twelve fish. The conjectural history of the origin of

³ While his use of biological evolution is still taken as metaphorical, it is acknowledged that some of his concepts were literally biological, although some dispute remains over their importance to Veblen's theories. For recent discussions see Rutherford 1998 on instincts, Jennings and Waller 1998 on race.

property, so far as it has been written by the economists, has been constructed out of conjecture proceeding on the preconceptions of Natural Rights and a coercive Order of Nature.⁴

Veblen draws on the mixture of history and ethnology that constituted the comparative method and concludes that ownership most likely began with the possession of captured women. Using the comparative method to trace the origins of *anything* is as suspect as the economist's use of rational reconstruction; nevertheless, by appealing to fairly accessible evidence from cultural anthropology--that is, reports of what contemporary people living outside of Europe were actually doing--Veblen does undermine the universalist assumptions of natural rights.

The evidence discussed so far falls within the established lines of cultural anthropology and Veblen does not appear to move far beyond this source of influence. The source of his material is almost certainly Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, where the same anthropological evidence is discussed and similar conclusions reached--though, as always, Spencer is much more scrupulous than Veblen about citing his sources.⁵ The novelty in Veblen's

⁴ Veblen 1998b[©1898], 32-33.

⁵ See Spencer 1896, Vol. II; also Eff 1989.

approach is to compare these findings to the established foundations of modern economics. The discussion never appears to descend below the cultural plane, although biological imagery and metaphor are included. That the anthropological arguments are drawn from Spencer need have no further significance unless Veblen affinity for Spencer's system is more extensive at this time than is generally recognized. If Veblen is indeed using a more Spencerian approach, then many of the biological metaphors in his writings cease to be metaphorical and the topics discussed adopt an additional biological meaning.

Consider this passage from "The Barbarian Status of Women," where Veblen discusses the coexistence of maternal and paternal households among the early German tribes.

This mixture of marriage institutions, as well as the correlative mixture or ambiguity of property institutions associated with it in the Germanic culture, seems most easily explicable as being due to the mingling of two distinct racial stocks, whose institutions differed in these respects. The race or tribe which had the maternal household and common property would probably have been the more numerous and the more peaceable at the time the mixing process

began, and would fall into some degree of subjection to its more warlike consort race.⁶

At first glance this paragraph simply explains the alternate marriage institutions as the conquest of a peaceable group of people by a more warlike horde, and the mixing of their customs. Even on second thoughts, this remains the most likely interpretation. Nevertheless, Veblen shades this passage, and many other similar ones, more or less darkly with biological meanings. "Race" can be taken as simply a group of people, and Veblen implies he intends it as synonymous with "tribe." But "tribe" also carries the notion of blood ties. A Germanic tribe would be a combination of families who consider themselves related by blood. To some extent this would be a biological fiction, though to a large extent it would be a fact. Hence, Veblen may intend tribe as a qualifier, not as a synonym for race: that is, as a (biologically distinct) race or a subgroup of that race conquered a group of people from a different race.

This interpretation is not farfetched. The tribes involved would see themselves as biologically distinct to a greater or lesser extent. Such a perspective would also seem obvious enough in the social Darwinist milieu of the 1890s when the 'superior' white Europeans were overrunning

⁶ Veblen 1998a[©1899], 62.

black Africa and the native Americans in North America. It remains easy enough in the 1990s to think of instances of peoples racially identical who consider themselves somehow biologically distinct from their closest neighbors, even though culture and genetics have removed any scientific validity for such beliefs. In the nineteenth century the scientific grounds for rejecting such distinctions were still close to non-existent.

This may seem like taking excessive pains to make the point that Veblen may have had in mind a biological meaning for race or tribe. The meeting and merging of the two marriage forms is still easily explicable in cultural terms, whether the tribes were of one race, two races, or some conglomeration of different races. Without some further theoretical construction there is not even any ground for seeing this coexistence of marriage forms as having any evolutionary implication, even in a merely cultural sense.

If Veblen was combining biological evolution with the comparative method, then the quoted passage has a far broader meaning than is apparent at first. First, Veblen prefaces this example with the accepted belief of cultural evolutionists that the matrilineal household preceded the patrilineal, and thus marked an earlier, or lower stage of cultural development. Similarly, the warlike race would be

in the higher barbarian stage than the peaceable, savage race.

Second, in an evolutionary system such as Herbert Spencer's, the transition from the maternal to the paternal household resulted from gradual adaptation to the supposed superior form and from the Lamarckian transmission of acquired traits through procreation. Hence, as people adapted to the paternal system, it became integrated into their biological make-up, and it became heritable. Such beliefs attract little support now, but the logic of the comparative method and the blending of biology and culture made some such explanation necessary. Lewis Henry Morgan provides an additional example that leading anthropologists at that time held such beliefs. Morgan, who had a very unilinear view of cultural evolution and wrote extensively on the evolution of the family, concluded that marriage practices ran "in the blood."⁷ The incorporation of the warlike animus into the biological make-up follows the same line of argument *mutatis mutandis*.

Third, a biologically based explanation suited much of the racial anthropology of the second half of the century. Veblen's description would be widely taken as referring to the conquest of the plodding, peaceable Alpine race by the energetic, bellicose Aryan race and the imposition of the

⁷ See Harris 1968, 138.

superior Aryan institutions upon the existing structure.⁸ So far claims that Veblen held these views have relied on placing somewhat tenuous biological interpretations on materials that appear to warrant a cultural explanation. However, more solid evidence for this claim can be found in Veblen's other writings from this time.⁹

Lamarckism and Instincts

The most overtly biological paper Veblen published in the 1890s was "The Instinct of Workmanship and the Irsomeness of Labor." This was the first of the three articles that appeared in consecutive editions of *The American Journal of Sociology*.¹⁰ Once again Veblen draws on other disciplines to assault another of the common-places

⁸ Veblen makes an observation related to this discussion in *The Leisure Class*, where he says that it is easier for societies to regress to an earlier standpoint than to progress. "This is especially true in case the development away from this past standpoint has not been due chiefly to a substitution of an ethnic type whose temperament is alien to the earlier standpoint." Veblen 1975[©1899], 196.

⁹ See the following section and Chapters IV and V. A final observation may be made on the literary merits of this passage. In this marriage metaphor--the peaceable race "would fall into some degree of subjection to its more warlike consort race"--Veblen is obviously mimicking in the relationship between the races the subject matter of the essay, the violent seizure of wives and the establishment of the patriarchal household. He may also have had in mind the commonly used classification of the brunets, especially as associated with the French, as a "feminine" race, and the blond Germans as a "masculine" race, particularly in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. See Poliakov 1974, 264.

¹⁰ This article appeared in September 1898, and was followed by the more 'cultural' articles "The Beginnings of Ownership" and "The Barbarian Status of Women."

of received economic theory: that work is inherently irksome. This time Veblen does not rely on data from other cultures. He relies instead on the logic of biological evolution to argue that humans are essentially purposeful, constructive creatures. The supposed irksomeness of labor is thus a cultural creation, one that came into existence under the barbarian regime.

The general logic of Veblen's argument is straightforward: any species that "instinctively revolts at effort that goes to supply the means of life" would not succeed in provisioning itself adequately and would thus lose out in the struggle for survival. Consequently, the propensity for useful effort must have become an intrinsic part of human biological make-up at sometime in the remote past. The supposed aversion to labor results from humanity's unparalleled success at turning the material world to account. This success left the species a wide margin "to play fast and loose with the spiritual basis of its survival."¹¹ Mankind's innate proclivity to useful action had made the species so productive of the material means of life that some could engage their time in destructive pursuits and live in leisure on the productive labor of others. The ability to live without engaging in productive work became meritorious, and, conversely, having

¹¹ Veblen 1998e[©1898], 80.

to work became degrading. Work came to appear onerous as the result of a cultural valuation that esteemed leisure as an occupation.

Here we see one of the main themes that run through Veblen's work: the relationship between instincts and habits of thought, between nature and nurture. Scholars generally accepted that Veblen took instinct to be a biological phenomenon, although some dispute remains over how instincts came about and what exactly they entailed. This paper answers some of these questions.

Veblen emphasizes the continuity between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom and the role of biological evolution:

Like other animals, man is an agent that acts in response to stimuli afforded by the environment in which he lives. Like other species, he is a creature of habit and propensity. But in a higher degree than other animals man mentally digests the content of the habits under whose guidance he acts, and appreciates the trend of these habits and propensities. He is in an eminent sense an intelligent agent. By selective necessity he is endowed with a proclivity for purposeful action.

Veblen tries to explain how mankind comes by this proclivity, although his explanation is somewhat strange.

Malcolm Rutherford (1984) claims that Veblen tried to follow mankind back to a period before institutions existed. Most of Veblen's discussions do invite such a view and possibly it is a tenable claim for his later work. In his earlier work, Veblen never offers this explanation. In fact, perhaps illogically, he offers the opposite argument: instinctive behavior is the *result* of habitual behavior, not the initial cause of it.

A theme which runs through Veblen's work to the effect that the only reality is material reality and humanity's theories about reality are largely make-believes. These make-believes are largely rationalizations that extend from habitual patterns of behavior.¹² Veblen makes use of such a view in this article: "Man's life is activity: and as he acts, so he thinks and feels. This is necessarily so, since it is the agent man that does the thinking and feeling."¹³

¹² Veblen 1998e[©1898], 85. Veblen makes this connection in many places in his work. An extensive discussion on the relationship between activity and scientific knowledge is provided in "The Place of Science in Modern Civilization," in Veblen 1990e[©1906], and "The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View," in Veblen 1990c[©1908]. The broad argument is that savagery produces animistic explanations for phenomena as a personal guidance of events is the most obvious cause in the apprehension of the savage. Barbarian imagination runs along the same animistic lines with the addition of an invidious ranking of phenomena and an all-pervasive vision of reality as conflict. The appeal of modern science is to material cause and effect as modern industry has removed the personal factor in the sequence of events.

¹³ Veblen 1998e[©1898], 82.

So thoughts and feelings become associated with habitual activities.

It would seem to follow from Veblen's appeal to natural selection and the struggle for survival that if mankind had an innate propensity to provide for its material needs, just like any other species, this propensity would have been acquired by mankind's pre-human ancestors. However, Veblen begins his discussion of the source of the instinct of workmanship on the human plane; apparently this instinct encompasses something more than a brute drive for survival. To show that this is so I quote a rather extensive passage from "The Irksomeness of Labour."

What men can do easily is what they do habitually, and this decides what they can think and know easily. They feel at home in the range of ideas which is familiar through their everyday line of action. A habitual line of action constitutes a habitual line of thought, and gives the point of view from which facts and events are apprehended and reduced to a body of knowledge. What is consistent with the habitual course of action is consistent with the habitual line of thought, and gives the definitive ground of knowledge as well as the conventional standard of complacency or approval in any community. Conversely, a process or method of life, once

understood, assimilated in thought, works into the scheme of life and becomes a norm of conduct, simply because the thinking, knowing agent is also the acting agent. What is apprehended with facility and is consistent with the process of life and knowledge is thereby apprehended as right and good. All this applies with added force where the habituation is not simply individual and sporadic, but is enforced upon the group or the race by a selective elimination of those individuals and lines of descent that do not conform to the required canon of knowledge and conduct. When this takes place, the acquired proclivity *passes from the status of habit to that of aptitude or propensity. It becomes a transmissible trait*, and action under its guidance becomes right and good, and the longer and more consistent the selective adaptation through which the aptitude arises, the more firmly is the resulting aptitude settled upon the race, and the more unquestioned becomes the sanction of the resulting canon of conduct.

So far as regards his relation to the material means of life, the canon of thought and of conduct which was in this way enforced upon early man was what is here called the instinct of workmanship.¹⁴

¹⁴ Veblen 1998e[©1898], 87-88. Emphasis added.

I do not think that the process outlined here can be explained in other than Lamarckian terms. Instincts are acquired from habits, these instincts are inherited, and this inheritance is biological. The mechanism for inheritance may be lacking but the process is fairly explicit.

The important points for the rest of this discussion are (1). This instinct was acquired on the human plane. It is more than a continuation of some earlier animal instinct and has some distinctly human associations. (2). It carries a moral valuation, not just a purely impulsive drive to some action; the valuation that certain actions are 'right and good' is inherited along with the impulse to the action itself. (3). The longer the period during which this aptitude is enforced upon a population, the more deeply ingrained it becomes. (4). Presumably humanity's other instincts were obtained in a similar fashion.

If Veblen only meant these conjectures to apply to the remote origins of humanity's instinctive make-up, then this could be passed over as nothing more than a curious speculation. However, Veblen attempts to integrate this process of Lamarckian inheritance into his theory of institutional evolution as set forth in *The Leisure Class*. Veblen does color "The Instinct of Workmanship" with a Darwinian tone, but the main process is definitely

Spencerian, particularly that inheritance involved the transmission of moral standards. With this in mind we may turn to Veblen's most extensive attempts to explicate the process of institutional evolution, and also one of the most difficult sections of his work to interpret.¹⁵

¹⁵ Spencer adhered to Lamarck's version of biological evolution although he allowed a limited role for natural selection. Veblen tried to capture both processes within the phrase *selective adaptation*, which contains a mixture of Lamarckism and Darwinism. Although Veblen uses a straightforward Lamarckism in this article, the total evolutionary process to which he applies the process of selective adaptation is much more complicated. See the discussion of *The Leisure Class* below.

CHAPTER IV

BIOLOGY AND BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION IN *THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS.*

I argued at the close of the previous chapter that in "The Instinct of Workmanship and the Iirksomeness of Labor" Veblen described how aspects of human psychology had become integrated into human biology and had become inheritable traits. In this particular case Veblen talked of habits passing to the status of instincts. This process conforms with the Lamarckian process for evolution employed by Herbert Spencer and many other social Darwinists at that time.

Veblen's use of a Lamarckian process makes a significant point for the remainder of my argument, but by itself it does not move the argument very far. It may be allowed that biological evolution endowed humans with innate psychological traits, and that these traits constituted "human nature." It then follows that Veblen conceived human personality, or character, as a combination of human nature and the more malleable psychological characteristics learned from the prevailing cultural environment. The most important of these psychological traits are instincts and habits, terms which Veblen often uses as a simple shorthand for those aspects of human

psychology that are respectively inherited and learned. The literature on Veblen follows this shorthand and concludes that Veblen employed an habit/instinct psychology. Although this oversimplifies Veblen's view of human character it is sufficiently accurate for brevity.

Scholars accepted that Veblen attributed human behavior partly to instincts and partly to habits of thought. However, the accepted position is usually qualified by arguing that Veblen believed that these biological traits had been acquired in the distant past, had remained unaltered since then, and had been relatively unimportant in influencing subsequent events when compared with changes in the institutional structure of society. However, the treatment of instincts in "The Instinct of Workmanship" suggests that Veblen might take a different view of the role of biology in socio-economic change. By using a Lamarckian evolutionary process Veblen suggests that human nature is mutable, at least potentially.

Evolution in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

Veblen continues his discussion of evolutionary theory in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In chapters 8 and 9 of this work Veblen presents one of his most detailed discussions of the process of evolution. He endeavors to expound this process by blending the various evolutionary theories outlined above in Chapter 2: the stages of

cultural evolution, racial anthropology, and the gradualist evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer. Although the individual ingredients are easily recognized, the resulting concoction is difficult to summarize and label. Given their importance to the main thesis of this work, I will spend some time unraveling the meaning of these chapters.

Incompatibility of Theories

Chapters 8 and 9 are rather complex, so it is best, for the sake of clarity, to outline the shape of Veblen's arguments before considering the actual text. It can be said, at the outset, that no single coherent theory of evolutionary process can be extracted from these chapters because fundamental incompatibilities exist between the various theories Veblen considers. The text shows that Veblen recognized some of these incompatibilities, although it is uncertain how deeply this recognition went. He refuses to commit himself to one explanation. Later, when Veblen revised this aspect of his work and gave it a greater degree of consistency, he explicitly identified additional problems with the compatibility of these theories.

Veblen attempts to combine three broad theories. Each theory has numerous components that allow their combination in endless variations, several of which Veblen considers. The first is the cultural stages theory. This could be

treated as entirely cultural and at times Veblen concedes that the process he is elaborating might be purely a matter of habit. Alternatively, the cultural stages could be combined with any of the various models of biological evolution, which is what Veblen in fact does.

Veblen uses the same nomenclature for the stages and sub-stages as Lewis Henry Morgan, while making little comment upon them. He draws heavily upon the literature of cultural anthropology at this time, although he always has his eye on its significance for the evolution of western culture. Veblen takes it for granted that savage, barbarian, and civilized is a broadly useful description of the various human societies, and he borrows freely from non-western societies to fill in the history of the west. It is unclear whether he thought these stages applied in detail to any particular cultures. In other words, despite his obviously evolutionary perspective he provides insufficient discussion of the course of cultural evolution to make it clear if he held a unilinear or multilinear view. From what he does say Veblen appears more comfortable with a unilinear view in *The Leisure Class* than in his later work.

Two points may be distinguished here. The first is whether evolution is unilinear or multilinear; the second, whether it is "progressive." Veblen uses the stages theory and talks of cultures progressing and regressing, which

implies a progressive, unilinear view.¹ However, he uses the stages in such a loose fashion and seems to consider the human nature of the savage superior to the barbarian and even to the civilized human, that qualifying arguments could easily be presented. Overall, Veblen seems to be using the stages theory, with its implications of progress without, as yet, addressing the accuracy of their implications for his own vision of cultural evolution.²

The major problems Veblen encounters in these chapters from *The Leisure Class* do not hinge on his use of the comparative method. (This has certain problems associated with it that will be mentioned after the major obstacles are dealt with). The major obstacles arise from the two conflicting biological theories employed in these chapters.

Taking it as given that cultures evolve, the issue here is whether this is explicable in terms of culture by itself, or whether it involves biological evolution either as a cause or as an effect. As already mentioned, Spencer employed Lamarckism to explain cultural evolution as a cumulative process of interaction between the internal and external factors of human life. Changes in culture led to changes in human nature, which in turn affected culture, and so on. Veblen has a similar type of process in mind at

¹ For example, Veblen 1975[©1899], 6, 188.

² Compare, for example, the evaluation he makes of western culture just a few years later in "The Place of Science in Modern Civilization," Veblen 1990e[©1906], 1.

this time, one that combines Darwinism and Lamarckism. Because it involves the gradual adjustments of the human subject and the social environment, this process may be identified as "gradualist," in line with Darwin's evolutionary terminology. This constitutes the second of the three general theories Veblen was using.³

The third theory is that of the European physical anthropologists, which I have called the racial theory. Veblen says little about race in any of his works before *The Leisure Class* and here he limits any detailed discussion to the European peoples. In the hands of the continental Europeans the biological aspects of this theory were generally anti-Lamarckian and nominally Darwinian. The continental Europeans claimed that the present European peoples were all descendants of three primordial white races. They claimed to be Darwinian by alleging that natural selection acted upon these people and chose the race fittest to survive, or at least to rise to a dominant position.

The white European 'race' was superior to other races, whereas among the three 'races' that constituted the European population the dolicho blond was superior. Needless to say, this theory blurred the distinction

³Veblen's phrase "selective adaptation" might have been used for this theory, as this is the process to which it is usually applied. However, Veblen also applies selective adaptation, in a less certain sense, to cultural evolution and race theory.

between biological and cultural factors. More significantly, for the current purpose, its purported Darwinism ignored all that was known of heredity at the time and the facts about the European population's hybridization. Even if the original races had existed they had been intermingling for thousands of years, producing a thoroughly hybrid population. Race theorists acknowledged this and then ignored it, pretending that these millennia of interbreeding had little effect and that the reality or the original races still lived and breathed beneath the facts. Consequently all members of the current population could be assigned to one race or another. Thus this theory really worked in the opposite direction to Darwinism. The original races existed thousands of years ago and any selection or crossbreeding that took place in the interim was of little significance. What was significant was the selection of the well-established and superior racial type, the dolicho blond. This theory was not really biological in any sense that would be recognized by Darwin. It took race as the unit of selection in a form of social Darwinism more flagrant than anything Herbert Spencer might have condoned.

These two biological theories tended to pull in different directions, although they could be made compatible with one another in certain contexts, and made to provide a biologically based theory for observed events that was in harmony with the state of science and

intellectual prejudice in the late Victorian period. For example, it seemed beyond questions to observers at the time that the English and the Tasmanians were distinct races. These distinctions could be explained by gradualist theories. Even if both races had descended from a common ancestor they had been geographically separated for thousands of years and had gradually evolved into distinct races--races so distant that they may no longer be interfertile. In the interim, the English race had progressed through barbarism to civilization, while the Tasmanians had languished in the lowest reaches of savagery: a stone age relic from the childhood of mankind. When these long separated cousins finally reunited, the Tasmanians progressed rapidly to extinction. This result appeared to conform with the evolutionary laws of Mr. Darwin and Mr. Spencer, and to confirm European superiority.

Comparisons that relied on such extremes of geographical and cultural separation supplied examples of the veracity of evolutionary competition that were easily credible to the Victorian mind. However, such a blending of gradualist and racial theories became suspect when used to deal with groups closer in space and culture. Due to their long cohabitation and interbreeding, the European population was problematic for more scrupulous race theorists such as Paul Topinard. It was a simple matter

only for those who chose to ignore the problems, such as the anthropo-sociological followers of Comte Arthur de Gobineau. The gradualist theory operated through the continuous modification of individuals within an environment, not on the persistence of racial type regardless of environment. Consequently, attempts to combine gradualism with persistent racial types generally acted to aggravate the difficulties of race theory rather than reduce them. However, harmonizing these two theories is exactly what Veblen attempts to do.

As will be explained below, Veblen recognized the problems in trying to combine these two biological views of the European population but seemed unwilling to choose between the theories. Apparently, he believed both theories to be true, in that they conformed to the necessary criteria of post-Darwinian science. He presented both of them in *The Leisure Class* and attempted to make them consistent with one another, although his discussion of the topics in *The Leisure Class* show that he knew he failed to do so. Perhaps he believed that if they were both true they must be reconcilable in some manner.⁴

⁴When he later adopted mutation theory Veblen applied it to the race theory and abandoned the gradualist theory as an explanation for biological change. See Veblen 1990d[©1913], 457.

These then are the three broad theories Veblen employed and the ones I want to distinguish even before discussing chapters 8 and 9. Each theory has its own particular details and difficulties, and Veblen tries to integrate them in various ways. This results in some of the hardest passages to understand in all of Veblen's writings, as testified to by the state of the debate on this aspect of his work. Veblen's exposition contributes to the difficulties as he tries to juggle all of these theories simultaneously, switching from one explanation to another, often within the same paragraph and sometimes within the same sentence. No one has ever claimed that Veblen is easy to read, but even for Veblen these chapters are difficult to untangle. Nowhere else in his work does Veblen so obviously struggle to formulate a theoretical explanation for the facts under consideration. This reflects the complexity of the issues with which Veblen wrestled within the state of knowledge at this time.

The remainder of this chapter will address Veblen's discussions of racial theory in *The Leisure Class*. Veblen follows a common practice at this time of designating racial types as "ethnic types." This designation indicates once again how social theorists readily confounded biological and cultural factors. The next chapter will examine Veblen's treatment of "variants," which was

Veblen's term for those aspects of human nature that changed in response to changes in the socio-economic environment.

Ethnic Types

I. Introduction

In his discussion of the European population Veblen asserted that it was constituted of "variants" of "persistent ethnic types." While this seems like an oxymoron, it is really somewhat akin to the earlier discussions of biological inheritance, whereby heredity is both conservative and divergent. Continuing the analogy with biological evolution, the survival of the ethnic types and variants is determined by a process of selective adaptation. This process operates at the level of biology and culture, involving a dynamic interaction between both planes. However, Veblen encountered difficulty in delineating the boundaries between the two and was forced, at crucial points, to admit his uncertainty.

II. The Language Employed

Veblen's use of language here is somewhat ambiguous, even contradictory. This might be due to carelessness in his use of terms. This difficulty arises again because Veblen was writing in that gray area between biology and culture where the vocabulary was not well defined, and he

used many words frequently that have both a cultural and a biological meaning--revert, survive, conserve, variation, environment--while others have several possible meanings even if restricted to one sphere--race, revert, type. This difficulty with vocabulary presents a problem for the interpretation of any writer of this period.

Following from this, a second problem arises from the distinctions I am trying to draw between cultural and biological factors in Veblen's work, distinctions that Veblen might not have considered legitimate. For example, I believe Veblen's applied the words "revert" and "survive" to two different phenomena, one cultural and one biological, whereas Veblen might have considered them part of a single process.

This leads to a third difficulty. For rhetorical purposes Veblen frequently personified such things as "ethnic types" and "predatory variants," and reified "institutions" and "society." However, his main focus was on the individual as a whole and the individual's interrelationship with the environment as a whole, and in Veblen's conception both the individual and the environment are a complex tangle of biological and cultural forces. This complex tangle makes it difficult to isolate the contribution by any specific factor in influencing individual behavior. For example, Veblen does not systematically analyze the contribution of race or habits

of thought to the overall social environment. Instead, he analyzes a particular social topic and slides back and forth between the biological and cultural factors involved, as the topic requires. Hence, the topic at hand might receive adequate treatment while the underlying theoretical assumptions or premises must be recreated by piecing together the different strands of information. This process often leaves a very fragmentary picture that can only be partially filled in by reference to the wider intellectual sources that Veblen drew upon, particularly those of ethnology and anthropology.

III. The Reproduction of Ethnic Types

Veblen employs the term 'ethnic type' to identify one of the biologically based classifications of mankind that he makes use of in his work. Ethnic type denotes a persistent, stable type of body and mind that is hereditary. Veblen uses ethnic to denote groupings of people that many other writers refer to as 'races.' Hence, ethnic, here, is not employed to describe an entirely cultural phenomenon. Veblen clearly has some biological designation in mind, as he claims that "the ethnic types of today...are variants of the primitive racial types."⁵ Apparently Veblen draws a distinction, common in

⁵ Veblen 1975[©1899],

anthropology at the time, (common though not consistently applied), between employing 'racial' for the strictly biological study of human groups, and 'ethnic' when the study also involved discussion of the history and culture of any particular race. Possibly Veblen also preferred ethnic over racial because in his conception there had been a systematic divergence of most human groups from their original racial temperament, so that the existing populations were variants of the earlier racial types.⁶

What Veblen means exactly by "type" is also unclear. Writers in the biological and anthropological sciences frequently employed this word, although with diverse meanings. It is likely that Veblen intended the word in Paul Topinard's sense, as a construct for identifying a racial (or ethnic) group based on some average characteristics to which the members of the group more or less conformed.⁷ Veblen might also have meant the word to be taken in the earlier fashion of an "ideal" type, although that would seem to imply too much of a metaphysical divergence from Veblen's normal approach to social science.

⁶ In a reply to an attack on anthropo-sociology by John Cummings, Carlos Closson said racial and ethnic were taken as synonymous by most writers. Closson 1900a, 404.

⁷ Cf. Also A.H. Keane, 1896, and William Ripley in his influential *Races of Europe*, 1899. Ripley defined a race in terms of "traits," organized into "types" that are inherited. Ripley also claimed that the use of "race" in anthropology was analogous to the use of "type" in zoology, which gives some indication of how confusing an expression like "racial type" might be.

Nevertheless, much of Veblen's discussion of race presents a strange inconsistency in his method of analysis, so this remains a possibility.⁸ Regardless of whether Veblen had an exact meaning in mind, his interest was more in the psychological, not the physical aspects of the distinction. As Veblen said "I use type loosely to denote variations of temperament."⁹

Through much of his work Veblen maintained that biological distinctions between human groups played a causal role in determining economic behavior. However, his entire discussion of the subject was restricted to the people of Europe and the areas of European settlement overseas: that is to say, those groups who traced their heritage to Europe and went to make up the Occidental, or Western culture. For convenience, I will refer to these people collectively as *European*.

⁸ It is possible that biological usage influenced Veblen more directly, by, for example, the idealist morphologists. They emphasized "the concept of the 'unity of type'...This gave rise at first to the school of idealist morphology...The anatomists of the idealist morphology always stressed the conservative nature of the type," or the persistence of type, as in Thomas Huxley's "The Persistent Types Of Animal Life." See Mayr 1982, 336 and 614. Veblen's discussion does emphasize the persistence of ethnic types and their conservative influence on the social environment. See below.

⁹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 218. In addition to "ethnic types" Veblen frequently refers to "ethnic elements." This latter phrase seems to mean no more than the component groups from whom any population is comprised. In his later work Veblen retains the same idea of biological distinctions between groups, only now he drops the expression "ethnic types" and uses "races." See, for example, Veblen 1939[©1915], Chapter 1.

Veblen follows the dominant belief among anthropologists that the European population was comprised of three races or ethnic types, disregarding minor outlying elements. The names considered appropriate for each type varied with the writer, as did their presumed origins and their career in prehistoric times. In his later work Veblen provided extensive discussions of these matters, but in *The Leisure Class* he simply took the existence of these types for granted and did not speculate on the more obscure facts of their pasts. His main commentary on the past was that these types had been subjected to a process of selective adaptation, and that the types had become stable and their characteristic traits fixed upon them.

Veblen identifies the types as "the dolichocephalic-blond, the brachycephalic-brunette, and the Mediterranean." These names were common enough in the literature at this time and corresponded to the generally accepted divisions of the population. The names themselves display some of the confusion prevalent in racial theorizing at the time. Two of the types are designated for their physical characteristics, with the third being named after its geographical dispersion.¹⁰ While physique and locale might

¹⁰ Many alternative names were in circulation at this time. If identified by geographic dispersion the blond was sometimes called the "Northern," and the brachycephalic-brunette the "Alpine" as they dominate throughout the Central region of Europe. By physical traits the Mediterranean was called the dolichocephalic-brunet. Lapouge used the zoological classifications of *Homo Alpinus*, for the brachycephalic-brunette, and *Homo Europæus* for the blond, as he

serve as identifying factors in most social Darwinist theories, it was the types psychological characteristics that were most significant for Veblen's theory of economic evolution. Given this, it is surprising how little elaboration Veblen gives to these distinguishing psychological traits.

Veblen spent much space analyzing the influence of "temperament" on institutions (and institutions on temperament) in a general or abstract manner. Unfortunately, he devoted little time to any detailed explanation of the cause and effect relationship between any of the specific ethnic types and the institutions under which they lived, severally or jointly. Apparently Veblen believed that the characteristic features of these ethnic types fell within the boundaries of that category of information that was well enough known to a literate audience, or sufficiently accessible to any interested party, as to require no elaboration.¹¹

The dolicho-blond was the only type whose temperament received some discussion, presumably because of its alleged emergence, in recent centuries, as the socio-economic leader of the European nations and consequently of global

believed that the blond was the only race that was indigenous to Europe, first appearing as a climatic variation in the region of the Baltic Sea. He later switched to another common designation for the blond, Aryan. Other popular names for the blond type were Teutonic, Nordic, and Anglo-Saxon.

¹¹ Veblen, 1975, "Preface."

affairs. The dolicho-blond displayed "more of the characteristics of the predatory temperament--or at least more of the violent disposition--than the brachycephalic-brunette type, and especially more than the Mediterranean;" and the blond possessed "the characteristics of predatory man in an exceptional degree." These characteristics being "(in their primary expression) ferocity, self-seeking, clannishness, and disingenuousness--a free resort to force and fraud." These "spiritual traits, together with a large endowment of physical energy,- itself probably a result of selection between groups and between lines of descent,- chiefly go to place any ethnic element in the position of a leisure or master class."¹²

¹² Veblen 1975[©1899], 217 and 225. This conclusion, that the occidental leisure class consisted predominantly of dolicho blonds, accords with Lapouge's "Laws of Anthro-po-sociology." These selectionists discovered that fair long heads possessed disproportional wealth and social status within the ethnic types of Europe. As indicated, the other types seemed to owe their secondary position, among other things, to a relative deficiency in the ability to inflict devastating damage. Nevertheless, while the roundhead and Mediterranean might hold subordinate status within the white hierarchy, this was not taken to diminish their standing in relation to non-Europeans. And even among Europeans the blonds dominance was only an average result. In particular instances the blonds dark haired neighbors might excel and score "a spectacular (Napoleonic) success," (225). To provide for the deficiency in Veblen's discussion of temperament it might be well to provide some comparison from another source. Augustus Keane, who Veblen drew upon in his later work, might be taken as reasonably typical. Under "Temperament" he describes the dolicho blond as "earnest, energetic, and enterprising: steadfast, solid, and stolid: outwardly reserved, thoughtful and deeply religious: humane, firm, but not wantonly cruel." The other types are apparently only distinguishable by their head shape as Keane presents their traits together as "brilliant, quick-witted, excitable and impulsive; sociable and courteous, but fickle, untrustworthy, and even treacherous (Iberian, South Italian), often atrociously cruel.... aesthetic sense highly, ethic slightly

Veblen accepted, then, the belief of the racial anthropologists that the peoples of the occidental culture were descended from three primitive races. These types had originally a distinct physiology and temperament. Subsequently, they had varied, in some fashion, so that now it was more appropriate to designate them as ethnic types instead of racial types. They had varied from their distant ancestors, yet remained sufficiently the same that they were still readily distinguishable, one from another. Accounting for this deviation within persistence became the crux of Veblen's problem at this time, and he attempted to accommodate the two in several ways.¹³

IV. Persistence and Hybridity

At this time Veblen provided little direct evidence of his opinions on race. He presented the topic as if the discussion were traversing ground familiar to all well-read persons of the time, and that the matter was fairly well

developed. All brave, imaginative, musical, and richly endowed intellectually" (Keane 1900, 442). Or Lapouge (1897, 58-9): the dolichoblond is "an ambitious, energetic, and courageous race," whereas the Alpine is "a cautious, unprogressive race, strongly attached to its native abode." Other writers had different variations and qualifications on these characteristics although those of the blond were usually taken as superior.

¹³ For the strict racial anthropologists this was a minor problem. As they rejected Lamarckism they could ignore changes through inheritance of acquired characteristics. This gave the racial types a large degree of stability. Their only problem then was that the modern population was interbred. They accommodated this fact by ignoring it. In Darwin's theory, constant variety emerges within a population and gradually produces new species.

understood and agreed upon. It is possible that Veblen was simply reiterating commonly held racial opinions. As a prelude to his major assessment of the links between race and social phenomena he warned that he presented this discussion "at the risk of some tedious repetition and formulation of commonplaces."¹⁴ However, this is a common Veblenian rhetorical device and is frequently employed when Veblen is about to present his own, original views on a topic. Under this guise, and mixed in with a more standard approach to ethnic matters, Veblen presents his theory on ethnic variation.

It seems unlikely though, that even the more conventional approach to ethnic types has been merely borrowed from someone else. The influence of certain sources, such as Topinard and Lapouge, is readily discernible, but once again Veblen shapes their material to his own purposes. There is little evidence in any of Veblen's work that he borrowed ideas from anyone else without thoroughly working them through for his own ends. This is one of the reasons Veblen is so difficult to pin down to any decisive source of influence. Given this, along with Veblen's familiarity with the racial anthropology of the time, and the length of time he devoted to writing *The Leisure Class*, it can only be supposed that these are

¹⁴ Veblen 1975[©1899], 213.

Veblen's considered opinions on the topic, and some of them are rather pronounced.

V. Ethnic Types and Natural Selection

Given that the European population was originally comprised of three primitive racial types, how had they each managed to survive and maintain their integrity over so many years of close contact? Veblen addressed this question, it being an important element in his evolutionary theory, and he provided a general answer: it is a combination of the tenacity of heredity and the process of selective adaptation. Nonetheless, the details of this process are left rather vague, and can only be sketched in by making comparisons with contemporary literature on this subject.

Veblen acknowledged that every European was a hybrid to a greater or lesser degree, and he must have known the difficulties investigators had encountered in finding even a single individual who possessed all of the requisite traits for any one of these presumed ethnic types. Nevertheless, Veblen claimed these ethnic types persisted among the members of the population, who tended to "breed true" or "take back" to one or another of the stable ethnic types. In other words, the mixing of these three ethnic types, whatever their origins, had not succeeded in producing a discernible population with hybrid traits.

Why should this be the case? This constant intermixing over long periods of time should have broken down the distinctive characteristics of the three types, regardless of whether inheritance was conceived in terms of unit characters or in terms of the blending of parental traits. Starting from three primitive racial types, the population should have become an amalgam of all their traits mixed together in a multitude of combinations.

Some allowance could be made for the effects of geographical isolation. Sweden might retain a clearer blend of blond traits and Sicily a more pronounced Mediterranean look, but throughout most of Europe the peoples should have merged with each person being something of a mosaic of traits. This was a picture that fit the situation approximately enough that the theory of three original races could retain some credibility as the initial starting point in the process of mixing. The problem was the traits taken as identifying the type were not "typical." The tall, fair, long-headed Swede and the short, long-headed, dark Sicilian, for example, presented traits that were not typical of their populations, but instead extreme.

Although the population could have been treated in its hybrid form Veblen repeatedly takes a harder racial line, claiming that the ethnic types "persist" and "survive" apparently on the grounds of "the recognized laws of

heredity."¹⁵ As blending or unit characteristics does not fit this situation, the question arises as to which recognized laws of heredity Veblen had in mind. He can only be referring to the consistent patterns of inheritance recorded among mongrel and hybrid plants and animals. So, what exactly is the biological relationship between the ethnic types that Veblen had in mind?

VI. The Relationship Between Ethnic Types

When 'race' is used at this time in connection with human beings it cannot by itself give a clear indication of the relationship that is assumed to exist between the different groups of people to which the word is applied, even if it is limited to a strictly biological meaning. In the taxonomy of biology it meant a subspecies or variety, although even there its use could be ambiguous as the term lacked technical precision. When applied to human groups the writer might have any of a range of relationship in mind.

Darwin admitted that typological evidence implied the human races were distinct species, but preferred to classify them as subspecies based on their interfertility. On the same evidence Topinard reach the opposite

¹⁵ This contrasts to his later views on hybridity where he attributes the restlessness and creative energy of the European population to the fact that they were a hybrid mix.

conclusion. He admitted that all human groups were fertile, *inter se*, yet denied that this proved they were a single species. He believed that on typological grounds the broad biological categories of humanity--black, white, and yellow--certainly identified distinct species, and possibly distinct genera.¹⁶

Veblen On the Races of Europe

Veblen, of course, restricts his analysis to the occidental peoples. These three types were usually taken as members of the same "white" race, along with various other groups scattered across Asia and Northern Africa. Sometimes these were referred to collectively as Caucasian, sometimes Aryan, and so on. If the broader categories were identified as distinct species then, by this criterion, the three types who comprised the European population should have been designated as subspecies or varieties.

An alternative nomenclature referred to these three peoples as races, as in William Ripley's *Races of Europe*. In some contexts this allowed, for example, an individual to be a member of the white "race" and the Alpine "race" simultaneously. In this case black, yellow, and white could be regarded as biological species, while Mediterranean, Alpine and Nordic might be taken as subspecies or

¹⁶ Darwin 1872; Topinard 1876.

varieties; that is, "races" in the original biological sense of the word. Some writers, such as Gobineau and Lapouge, took the next step and treated these European "races" as if they were equivalent to biological species, having their own type and essence. In practice, clear lines of demarcation were difficult to etch due to the obscurity of historical origins and centuries of biological intermixing, even before the additional confusion of cultural factors was introduced. Yet, somehow, the essence of the race survived the muddling of this mundane sphere, having its greatest reality in the metaphysical realm.

I. What Veblen Actually Says

Veblen has a very ambivalent position on this subject. Where he actually employs the word "race" he does so with a variety of meanings common to the word. Sometimes it refers to mankind collectively, as in the human race, sometime he implies the three ethnic types are subsumed into a single race, and then, as already mentioned, he describes them as variants of primitive racial types, implying they are distinct races.¹⁷

He frequently referred to the persistence of the ethnic types in the European population, yet he also admits that all of the individuals in this community are hybrids.

¹⁷ Veblen 1975[©1899], 196, 214, and 218.

If individuals inherit part of their character, and this character is partly determined along racial lines, then this intermixing should act to blend both character traits and physical traits. In several places, where he mentions hybridity, Veblen implies that the actual hybrids comprise only a fraction of the population, while the rest are of the pure types.¹⁸ Finally, he did admit the generally accepted view about the mixed character of these people. Then he immediately nullified its significance by offering a mitigating conclusion:

The individuals of these communities are conceived to be, in virtually every instance, hybrids of the prevailing ethnic elements combined in the most varied proportions; with the result that they tend to take back to one or the other of the component ethnic types.¹⁹

As already mentioned, this tendency to "take back" would be an unusual conclusion under the accepted laws of heredity, unless some significant biological barrier existed between these three types to prevent them merging. In addition, he explained the persistent distinction

¹⁸ Veblen 1975[©1899], e.g., "the several ethnic types and their hybrids" (214), "the main ethnic types and their hybrids" (215).

¹⁹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 217.

arising from the fact that "the man of our industrial community tends to breed true to one or other of three main ethnic types."²⁰ Unfortunately, it is not especially clear what process Veblen had in mind when he said "take back" or "breed true."

II. Implications on Race Relations

Some idea of Veblen's meaning can be gleaned from the earlier discussion of inheritance. Veblen used "breed true" to cover two phenomena. The first referred to the simple case of inheritance between two members of the same type, a type with stable, inheritable traits. So, obviously enough, two Alpines are most likely to produce Alpine progeny, and so on for the other types. In this case, stable ethnic types will inevitably tend to breed true and thus persist.

The second phenomenon is more complex and more problematic for any kind of racially based explanation of behavior. How does a population that is constantly being merged, then constantly separate again, like oil and vinegar, into its constituent elements? There are several possible explanations. Veblen admitted the hybridity of the entire population, which confirms his acceptance of the interfertility of the three types. Hence, no absolute

²⁰ Veblen 1975[1899], 215. I am trying to restrict the current discussion to "ethnic types," maintaining as clear a distinction as possible from Veblen's explanations for the persistence of "variants." Veblen uses the same language of inheritance and biological evolution in both cases and the two often merge.

biological division existed between the types. Thus, accompanying this constant mixing there must be a process of constant reversion taking place; the offspring, in general, "take back" to one or other of the parent types.

This claim can be brought into conformity with the results obtained by crossing varieties (mongrels) and species (hybrids), and the evidence of human crossings presented by anthropologists. Common patterns of inheritance had been observed in both mongrels and hybrids.²¹ After crossing, the first generation showed a fairly homogeneous blend of parental traits, with the strength of likeness to either parent varying from case to case. The second generation showed greater variety with a strong tendency for some of the offspring to revert to one or the other of the original parental types. The crossing of varieties usually produce vigorous offspring, while the vitality of hybrids varied depending upon the species crossed. The most persistent distinction between the two cases was in the fertility of offspring. Mongrels were interfertile, while the offspring of species, where they could be produced at all, were either sterile or had significantly reduced fertility. How these results applied to humanity was still somewhat uncertain. The claims of

²¹ Darwin wrote extensively on the outcomes of crossings as they were especially important for his evolutionary theory. See particularly Darwin 1998[©1868], Mayr 1982, 1991.

most writers on human crosses usually depended on the preconceived view of the informant on the supposed biological relationship between the races in question.

Which of these results would seem best to fit Veblen's view of the relationship between the three ethnic types? It seems that, implicitly, Veblen treated these ethnic types as distinct species, or at least *distant* varieties of the same species, so crosses would be classed as hybrids in the biological sense of the term. A mongrel population, if I may employ that word in the scientific sense of the time, might produce some progeny that tended to revert to one or other of the parental types. However, as all the progeny, with their entire mixture of traits, would remain fertile, *inter se*, their continued interbreeding over hundreds of generations would work towards homogenizing the population to a large extent, over most of the European continent. This could occur without the necessary appearance of a new ethnic type with persistent and stable traits.²² There would be, instead, a whole array of traits varying in a seemingly random manner among individuals, with some conformity of traits due to geographical isolation in some regions. This would fit the observed facts of the distribution of physical traits among the European population. Of course,

²² Carlos Closson claimed the Alpine and Mediterranean races were stable, hybrid types who had resulted from this type of interbreeding, had achieved some degree of fixity, and bred true to their type, Closson 1896c, 457-8.

accepting this conclusion would be disastrous to any theory based on persistent psychological differences existing between racial types. If physical traits were so hopelessly mingled, then one could only assume that the same was true of psychological traits.

The picture Veblen presents shows the three types combining yet remaining divided. These ethnic types could be prevented from merging if they were sufficiently distinct that some biological barrier limited the level of fertility between them. In this case offspring would be hybrids, in the zoological sense, and have reduced fertility. Reduced fertility would stop hybrid lines becoming established. If hybrids continued to interbreed that line of descent would quickly dwindle.²³ However, hybrid fertility could quickly return to normal levels when hybrids were crossed back on either one of the parent types. Added to this was the tendency for hybrid progeny to revert to one or other of the parental types. Consequently, without any intent on the part of the population the distinct types would tend to reassert themselves even though the entire population was mixed, to a greater or lesser extent.²⁴

²³ Veblen frequently refers to the "elimination of the unfit individuals and lines of descent." However, all of these references fall under the category of "social" (post natal) selection to be discussed below. See Veblen 1975[1899], 212, 222, 229, 235; and Veblen 1998e[1898], 89.

²⁴ If Veblen does intend something like this, then he had no reason to

The language Veblen employed to explain the persistence of ethnic types shows that he had a biological mechanism in mind, regardless of whether he was fully cognizant of all its implications. This mechanism falls within the scope of natural selection as certain lines of descent are retained while others are eliminated. For whatever reason, the biological characteristics of the European population prevented a new, stable variety from becoming established. In this particular instance, natural selection was acting as a conservative force by preserving the existing physical and spiritual traits of this population. Along with many of the anthropologists of his time, Veblen is saying that the human material that went to make up the European population of his day differed little from what it had been thousands of years ago.

Post-Natal Selection and Social Selection

Veblen accepts as a biological or empirical fact that the European peoples were comprised of three, stable ethnic types. These types persisted in the European population due to a process of selection that might best be regarded as natural selection. In this case, the selection process acts

worry about the effects of hybridity as it existed in name only. Even if a person had mixed blood they conformed to only one ethnic type. Count Arthur de Gobineau 1967[1854] argued that the races remained distinct through a natural aversion to miscegenation, similar to species in nature. Somehow this aversion was always overcome, resulting in racial impurity and the collapse of one civilization after another.

to maintain these ethnic types and limit or eliminate any variation arising from hybridity. This selection is "natural" as it focuses on the reproduction of hereditary traits, and might be called pre-natal selection as it determines the viability of different lines of descent entirely on biological grounds that are independent of the impinging social forces. Veblen mentions no other aspect of the selection process that prevents variation occurring through hybridity. This aspect of the selection process accords with Darwinian biology: these ethnic types are "fittest" only in the sense that they "survive" due to the working of natural forces that look to no final purpose. Here heredity maintains the existing types. In Veblen's words, "the selection of favorable variations is perhaps in great measure a selective conservation of ethnic types."²⁵

I. Social Effects of Pre-Natal Selection

This aspect of the selection process is completely fortuitous and lies beyond the influence of environmental forces. Any explanation for these results lay beyond the knowledge of science at that time. Veblen simply combines the observed results of cross breeding with a (strong) assumption that these ethnic types had in fact retained their distinct characteristics. Although the forces at work

²⁵ Veblen 1975[©1899], 189. Emphasis added.

are biological and not social, the conservation of ethnic types does have practical consequences for the character of society. As each ethnic type has its own distinctive temperament, each contributes its share to the "human material" from which society is constructed. While Veblen disallowed variation in social temperament from the biological mixing of ethnic types, he did allow variation from changes in the relative numerical strength of the ethnic types who comprise the social population. The mixing of types is not a mixing of traits among individuals to produce new types, but a mixing of individuals in society to produce new social environments.

Veblen subsumes the causal factor at work in varying the ethnic mix under the process of selective adaptation. In particular, it is a process of selection *between* ethnic types. Unlike the selection of ethnic types, there appears to be no purely biological explanation for changes in the ethnic mix of the European population. Veblen gives no indication that innate differences exist among the ethnic types that cause differentials in fertility or mortality rates. Hence some other process must be causing variations in the relative numbers of each ethnic type. Unfortunately, the description Veblen provides is rather vague as he mostly keeps the discussion on an abstract level, referring only to "the selective process." Once again, it is necessary to piece together the underlying process at work.

At any one time, the process of selection tends to favor one type of temperament over the others, and thus one ethnic type over the others. The type so favored improves its relative position in society, and, in doing so, changes the temper of society overall. Hence, there may be "a variation in the fundamental character of any population by selection between relatively stable types."²⁶ If the prevailing environment favored resort to physical force, for example, then that ethnic element most gifted in applying the strong hand would find itself advancing at the expense of the weaker elements, and the temper of society would shift in that direction. This shift would consist of two factors. The first is through the ascent of the more violent type. The second is through the socialization of the population as a whole. The individual would take on a habitual attitude of mastery or subservience regardless of, or in addition to, any initial ethnic traits.

In the history of Europe the ethnic type Veblen identifies as the dolicho-blond had achieved a position of dominance among the population. Gobineau and Lapouge attributed this dominance to the natural leadership qualities of the blond. The blond constituted a "natural"

²⁶ "In the life history of any community whose population is made up of a mixture of divers ethnic elements, one or another of several persistent and relatively stable types of body and temperament rises into dominance at any given point. The situation, including the institutions in force at any given time, will favour the survival and dominance of one type of character in preference to another." Veblen 1975[©1899], 189.

aristocracy. Veblen agreed that the blond had attained a dominant position in the Occidental culture, and that this success was due to the blond type possessing, to an extreme degree, those traits normally associated with aristocracy. However, he takes a less romantic view of these attributes than the anthropo-sociologists.

In Veblen's scheme, the rise to hegemony of the dolicho-blond would commence with the transition to barbarism. Those proclivities that enabled the blond to secure an aristocratic status were less the ones that conduced to the building of civilization, than the ones that allowed the seizure of a livelihood without suffering the irksomeness of producing a useful product. Like the delinquent, who was frequently of the same ethnic type, the blond's most distinctive trait was its instinct of sportsmanship, which allowed it to obtain a livelihood through a predatory exploitation of others. This did not restrict success in predatory competition to the blond. Nevertheless, the greater force of its temperament in this direction gave it an advantage, on the average, and had secured its dominant representation among the leisure class.

Under the quasi-peaceable régime the blond had still fared well, as the rise of business allowed the blond to redirect its characteristic animus towards pecuniary exploit. However, Veblen did not view the preferential

social standing of the blond as being due to any absolute superiority, as was believed by Lapouge. Even under the predatory régime members of the other ethnic types, particularly the brachycephalic-brunette, could score "a brilliant (Napoleonic) success on the basis of an impartial self-seeking and absence of scruple."²⁷ Of more significance were changes in the overall social environment. With the change in circumstances there came a change in the traits most favorable to success. The barbarian régime had provided an environment conducive to the exercise of the predatory instincts possessed by the blond. But the earlier and more extensive savage régime provided greater scope for developing peaceable, workmanlike traits than for the exercise of force or fraud. Veblen suggested that the discipline of modern industrial society might be leading back towards a higher regard for workmanship over sportsmanship, so that the blond would lose its differential advantage in the social struggle to one or the other of the "lower" ethnic elements.²⁸ This in turn would effect the overall temper of the European society.

Who rises to dominance depends on the circumstances in force at any particular time. However, some question arises

²⁷ Veblen 1975[©1899], 226.

²⁸ Veblen 1975[©1899], 217.

as to what "dominance" exactly means, and how it is attained. Veblen leaves these points unclear.

It seems that an ethnic type is "dominant" to the degree that it can shape the fundamental character of society. This appears to be partly a matter of numbers, at least relative numbers, and partly a matter of the trait in question. The dolicho-blond had originally attained its dominant position through its free resort to force, and retained this position through a combination of force and fraud. It had managed to shape society in the direction of its own animus by maintaining a relatively large representation among a relatively small ruling class. In addition, a sizeable number of its equally pugnacious but less successful kin were mingled with the broader population. It might be reasonable to say that a relatively small number of blonds might be sufficient to dominate a predatory society.

On the other hand, under the movement Veblen discerned in modern societies towards a more democratic and industrious scheme of life, as well as under the old savage régime, the society would require a relatively large percentage of its population to display the more peaceable traits. This might be no more than saying that an aristocratic society is ruled by a small oligarchy who can readily summon violence to support their position, while an industrial democracy requires a large number of people

whose minds are on their own affairs and who are not strongly moved to disturb the peace by the spurring of an irresistible, innate propensity. If this is so, then Veblen suggested that the proclivity of the population to adhere to one form of society rather than the other was only partly determined by its ethnic mixture. It must always be remembered that Veblen takes ethnic traits to be only one of the factors at work in shaping social structure.

In much of Veblen's work it is often difficult to identify the exact causal sequence because he views social change as a cumulative process. What is cause and what effect depends upon the point in the sequence at which one begins the analysis. This observation is true of his analysis of ethnic types. There is presumed to exist a distinct ethnic temperament determined by the relative distribution of emphasis among the inherent, psychological traits of human beings.

The psychological temperament of each person of European descent conforms to one of these presumed ethnic temperaments more or less closely. The extent to which this inherited temperament favors individuals in the life process depends upon the prevailing social environment into which they are born. This environment has been shaped by what has gone before. But what it becomes depends on how it is remolded by the current population. Historically, the dolicho-blond had fared well in a predatory environment as

this circumstance favored its temperament, on average, over the other ethnic types. Thus favored, the blond would retain its dominant position and shape society in its own likeness, making a predatory bent favorable for success in the next generation. Hence, once society begins moving in one direction the process of selection tends to reinforce this trend.²⁹ Unfortunately, Veblen is not very clear on exactly how this process operates.

There are two sides to the selection process. On one side is the thing that does the selecting. On the other side is the thing that is selected. Veblen identifies the first as "the situation, including the institutions in force at any given time," or "the environment, the situation, the exigencies of life."³⁰ On the other side of the process, the things being selected are the ethnic types. So in its most general sense, the relationship is that the "environment" selects the ethnic types. This is perhaps legitimate at the same level of abstraction as Darwin's "natural selection of species." Indeed, Veblen seems to have had in mind something analogous, if not identical to natural selection. But the exact mechanism, or mechanisms, by which the environment selects the ethnic types receives little attention.

²⁹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 189.

³⁰ Veblen 1975[©1899], 189 and 191.

Difficulties exist with both sides of the process. In Veblen's system ethnic types are selected, although this is an unintended outcome of a different target for selection. I say "unintended" here as there is no indication in Veblen's work that this outcome is due to any conscious conflict or even animosity between the ethnic types. In fact, within historic times, their actions accorded with national affiliations rather than ethnic identity. The dolicho-blonds, on each side of national boundaries, were often credited with instigating national hostilities, and when European nations went to war each national army would be a mixture of ethnic types. Instead of ethnic types, Veblen's process targeted particular traits for selection. These traits are part of individuals, of course, and these individuals are members of one or another of the ethnic types. Consequently, the outcome of this process was a change in the differential strength of one or other of the ethnic types, although the process acted upon individuals, not biological groups or the national aggregate of groups.

The environment as selector is also difficult to identify and fills a role analogous to "nature" in Darwin's theory. Darwin did not intend Nature to be taken in an animistic, or anthropomorphic sense. It was simply used to identify a general process at work in the natural world that reached analogous results to human, artificial selection. Natural selection provided a convenient term

that covered an endless series of specific acts of selection that were taking place. Veblen's selection process is similarly broad and covers a large number of possible events, events that change over time.

For example, during the savage stage of cultural development Veblen saw the struggle for existence taking place between the group and its natural environment. Until mankind developed sufficient tools to dominate the material world it was vulnerable to the same natural forces as any other species. During the barbarian stage this struggle switched to one between the individuals within the group. The modern phase of cultural growth offered the possibility of an end to competition and a return to a more cooperative form of society as the interests of different groups were no longer necessarily in conflict.

Changes in the environment cause changes in the selective process. During the savage stage the process is very similar to one of natural selection. This expression might also be used for the later stages, but as the struggle has changed from humans against the natural environment to a struggle within a human environment it might be more appropriate to apply Lapouge's concept of "social selection." Veblen does not use the exact phrase, although he describes a similar process and reaches an identical outcome with the selection between ethnic types.

The next question concerns the extent to which this selection process can be treated as literal or metaphorical. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the anthropologists believed that a literal, biological selection process was taking place among the races of Europe. Veblen is not sufficiently precise in his discussion of ethnic types, though again the process at work seems to be changing with the changing circumstances. Veblen does talk of survival, struggle, and elimination of lines of descent, implying that he had a literal selection process in mind. Such a process is readily imagined under the more violent era of the barbarian régime and the wars of the quasi-peaceable régime.

Further, if Veblen followed the lead of the anthropologists he would have accepted a literal process of social selection resulting in higher mortality rates from urban living, lower birth rates for the economically successful classes, and the other factors outlined by the selectionists, that caused selection among ethnic types. But Veblen also uses this process in the metaphorical sense of greater socio-economic success. The "lower" ethnic elements may not have been eliminated so much as "repressed" while the more successful, as conventionally measured, may not necessarily have increased in relative numbers so much as secured a greater measure of socio-economic power. Unfortunately, Veblen does not address the

issue with enough precision to allow a more definite conclusion to be offered.³¹

Conclusions on Ethnic Types

Ethnic types are biological classes distinguished by common physical and psychological traits that are inherited. They play two roles in Veblen's economic theory. First, there is a selection of the ethnic types. The ethnic types persist, so the human material available for building the European societies tends to remain constant. Second, there is a selection between ethnic types. The relative strength of each ethnic types changes as the social circumstances change, and this variation in the ethnic mix causes a change in the effective temperament of the population.

Some similarities have already been mentioned between Veblen's analysis of ethnic types and Darwin's theory of natural selection. Before leaving ethnic types, for a time, it might be worth examining these similarities more closely to assess to what degree the selection of ethnic types conforms to a model of evolution.

Veblen's use of ethnic types can be considered 'evolutionary' in a manner analogous to Darwinism. There is

³¹ The social selectionists and the eugenicists reached the ironic conclusion that socioeconomic success reduced biological success for a race, at least within the European context. Whether Veblen shared this opinion is again unclear.

certainly inheritance, variety, and selection. Each individual in the European population falls within one or another of the ethnic types. The traits of the type are passed on through inheritance, and due to a biological selection mechanism these types persist despite consistent intermixing. Thus selection maintains the three ethnic types, thus supplying three varieties of temperament out of which European society is constructed. The mixture of these types makes up the temperament of society at any point in time, and also provides the environment that acts as the point of departure for selection between the ethnic types, thus determining the direction of social change in the future.

This process is certainly evolutionary by the standards of social Darwinism of that time, and is very close to the process proposed by the anthropo-sociologists. The process Veblen describes can be construed as more akin to Darwin's vision of evolution than much of the developmental evolution of the time, as this process is cumulative but non-teleological; it moves towards no final term. The direction society is taking depends, in part, on the currently existing ethnic mix. This mix was determined by events in the past, and now determines, in part, the prevailing environment that shapes society for the future. However, the path society follows is largely unpredictable. Historically, the European society passed through savagery

into barbarism, and barbarism was most conducive to the temperament of the blond. The blond had been responsible for building the barbarian "civilizations" of history, but until now these civilizations had always ended in collapse. Gobineau viewed the history of the Old World as a cyclical process with its peaks and trough corresponding to the rise and decline of the blond element in different societies. Modern Europe had passed its prime and was now heading towards another period of malaise. This malaise was being brought about by a fall in the proportion of blonds in the population. Lapouge and many of the eugenicists shared this fear.

Although Veblen borrowed much of the anthropo-sociologists' analysis, he added much of his own, making for a less predictable relationship in the interplay between the individual and the environment. As the circumstances, including the ethnic mix, varied continuously, the direction of social change was uncertain. It is true that Veblen used the word "progress" more in *The Leisure Class* than in any of his subsequent works, and that the word often carried the notion of "improvement."³² But this is only in a general sense. In his most specific reference to progress Veblen said, "the direction of what is called progress [is] the direction of divergence from

³² See Jones 1986; Hodgson 1992.

the archaic position--from the position which may be accounted the point of departure at any step in the social evolution of the community." Similarly, he describes "retrogression [as] reapproach to a standpoint to which the race has been long habituated in the past."³³ While some moral evaluation may be associated with these statements, particularly with "archaic," they show that Veblen intended progress as a movement away from the existing situation, rather than as any necessary movement towards improvement. It may be noted, in addition, that his use of "social evolution" is as appropriate for describing a sequence of retrogression as of progress.

Ethnic types, then, form part of a process of social evolution analogous to Darwin's biological evolution. However, there are significant differences in these two theories. The ethnic types can be literally described as varieties or species engaged in a struggle for existence. As the circumstances change the relative numbers of each species wax or wane. But in Darwin's theory it is the species that evolve through this struggle. Here, the biological foundation of these species remains constant, it persists despite the changing circumstances. What "evolves" is society.

³³ Veblen 1975[©1899], 196.

On first impression, this might be taken as supporting Geoff Hodgson's claim that C. Lloyd Morgan had been a decisive influence on Veblen when he said "evolution has been transferred from the organism to his environment."³⁴ But there are problems with this argument. First, the social environment in this case is partly biologically determined: the mix of ethnic temperaments determines social temperament, and these temperaments are passed on to future generations through biological, not cultural, inheritance. Second, the source of this "model" is very obviously the anthropo-sociologists. Third, this forms only one component of Veblen's theory of the evolutionary process. The next component I will examine also has a biological foundation, but now the human organism itself evolves.

³⁴ Morgan 1973[©1896], 340; Hodgson 1998, 420.

CHAPTER V

VARIANTS OF HUMAN NATURE

The general story so far is that among the human population there exist physical and psychological traits, that these traits are combined into 'types' and that these types tend to "breed true." With minor, unimportant exceptions, the European population is made up from three distinct types. These are the modern descendants of the three primitive races who settled the European Continent in prehistoric times. Each individual European is some hybrid mixture of two or all three of these types. However, this mixing has not homogenized the European population; its members still tend to revert to one or other of these primitive racial types.

Although the population of the modern Western culture breeds true to the three main ethnic types, these types have not remained constant throughout their existence; they have undergone some variation.

These ethnic types survive in the race inheritance to-day, not as rigid and invariable moulds, each of a single precise and specific pattern, but in the form of a greater or smaller number of variants. Some variation of the

ethnic types has resulted under the protracted selective process to which the several types and their hybrids have been subjected during the prehistoric and historic growth of culture.¹

Variant describes a distinct kind of human nature with distinctive psychological traits, formed under the process of selective adaptation, and habituated to a particular manner of living. Veblen argued that there were two main lines of variation that had survived from the earlier cultural schemes and to which the population of modern Europe tended to adhere: "the peaceable or ante-predatory variant and the predatory variant."² In addition, the modern industrial and pecuniary culture was causing human nature to vary in new directions leading to the creation of new variants. Somewhat contradictorily then, the "types" varied while remaining fixed.

The explanation for this paradox lies in the differing roles played by heredity in Veblen's theory. Veblen presents little discussion of the origins of the primitive racial types from which the modern ethnic types are assumed to descend. However, the ethnic types have attained a degree of stability, and the population breeds true or reverts to one or other of the ethnic types, regardless of the existing

¹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 214.

² Veblen 1975[©1899], 214.

environmental circumstances. Each member of the European population adheres more or less closely to one of the three main ethnic types, but each is also a variant of that type. That is to say, a variant represents that part of human nature that varies in response to changing circumstances.³

The ethnic types have varied in the course of social evolution due to changes in the dominant cultural scheme. The peaceable variant arose under the savage regime and the predatory variant under the barbarian regime. Although both variants are consequently "archaic," they both survived into the modern industrial era. The first issue to address is whether Veblen pictured the persistence of these archaic traits as cultural survivals integrated into the institutional fabric of society and shaping the habitual views of new generations; or whether they were part of the temperamental proclivities of the European peoples incorporated in their biological make-up and passed on through sexual reproduction; or whether they were some combination of both.

³ A rough analogy might be made by assuming Irish and Italians were two distinct racial types. The Irish and Italian populations of New York city would have a distinct set of "racial" traits that would be maintained if reproduction took place within the group. However, living under the same new social environment, each would develop "New York" traits. In Veblen's scheme this "New Yorkness" would also become inheritable. Hence, each group might retain the same characteristics as its respective European relatives but in their New Yorkness the two groups would have grown similar to each other and away from their relations in the old country. Veblen recognized that these influences were cultural, but believed they became inheritable. The difficulty was in deciding which parts of behavior were attributable to what causes.

Biological Variation

In the earlier discussion of ethnic types difficulties arose in analyzing their place in Veblen's theory due to the various interactions Veblen envisioned happening between the types and the social environment. The discussion proceeded on the assumption that the types were essentially fixed categories and all that varied was their relative numbers in the population. Analysis of the variants, on the other hand, is complicated by the variation that occurs in the human nature of the individual members of society. Veblen described the variants as variations of the ethnic types, but this, while being literally true within the confines of Veblen's theory, had little practical import for his discussion. As these types varied with the changing cultural circumstances they all varied in the same direction. Under the savage regime all the types were more peaceable, and under the barbarian regime they were all more predatory. It is really two variants of human nature that are under discussion, as Veblen himself sometimes says, rather than two variants of three ethnic types. This allows types and variant to be treated separately, which facilitates understanding, as they are subject to distinct processes.

In the quotation with which this chapter opened Veblen makes no claim about whether the variation he will discuss should be seen as biological or cultural. As these variants are variations of ethnic types, and the ethnic types are

biological categories, it might follow that the variants should also be taken as biological. Veblen says as much in several places. In other places he argues as if "variant" is a cultural variation created by habits of thought adjusting to changing social circumstances. In yet other places his discussion could support either interpretation or seems contradictory. After looking at these various cases I will conclude that Veblen's incorporation of cultural and biological change into the process of selective adaptation made it impossible to draw a clear line between the biological and the cultural causes of behavior.

Veblen makes it clear that the traits peculiar to the variant of human nature are transmissible through inheritance: "if the type has varied, the traits of the type are transmitted approximately as they have stood in the recent past--which may be called the hereditary present."⁴ Once again we are back among the biological facts that underlay Darwin's theory of evolution--the persistence of heredity combined with the generation of variation. If any particular line of descent varies from its predecessors, this variation can be passed on to progeny. The "hereditary present" for the European population is "the later predatory and quasi-peaceable culture:" in other words, that period that marked the end of the barbarian culture. This means that

⁴ Veblen 1975[©1899], 215.

the modern European, in terms of human nature, was of a predatory disposition. Hence, a lag exists between biological inheritance and the requirements of the modern cultural scheme. As Veblen says, the "man of the hereditary present is slightly archaic as judged for the purposes of the latest exigencies of associated life."

Inheritance, however, has great tenacity and stretches back for more than a few hundred years. The European population may tend to breed true to the predatory variant, but it also shows a tendency to "revert" to an even more archaic variant of human nature: the ante-predatory variant who flourished under the savage scheme of life. So, as would be expected with inherited traits, the temperament, or human nature, of the population shows a greater natural affinity for past than for present circumstances.

This raises an important point for the analysis of Veblen's theoretical system. This conservation of archaic traits, as Veblen calls it, is conducive to a conservative or even reactionary attitude among the contemporary population of the "modern, civilized" nations of the Occidental culture.⁵ This conclusion is reached without any direct reference to imbecile institutions or institutional inertia. At this

⁵ Veblen describes the conservatism of the leisure class, for example, as "an instinctive resistance" to change, Veblen.1975[©1899], 203.

stage, Veblen explains this "cultural lag," as he later called it, due, in part, to genetic lag.⁶

Variants Under the Savage and Barbarian Regimes

An intimate relationship exists between these variants of human nature and the different stages of cultural growth. In fact, the two are so closely intertwined that the role of biological change in shaping human nature has been obscured, leading most commentators on Veblen's work to attribute changes in human behavior to changes in culture only.

The process of selective adaptation involved a cumulative sequence of interactions between human beings and their natural and social environment. The struggle for existence was a matter of adapting to the prevailing environment, with selection acting against those who failed to adapt. For human beings at the lowest cultural stage, this process was little different from that faced by the rest of the organisms in nature. This process became more complicated as humans moved up the cultural ladder as the environment to which they had to adapt--and the environment that exercised the selection--was increasingly created by humans themselves. Hence, every successful adaptation to the existing environment contributed to the contours of the future

⁶ Because institutions are habits of thought they are inevitably connected to the temperament of the population. If human nature plays a larger role in Veblen's earlier work than is generally accepted, it will necessarily have a larger influence in shaping the cultural environment.

environment, the environment to which humans would have to adapt and that would eliminate, through selection, those who failed.⁷

Two main variants of human nature had successfully survived out of the past and each of these had arisen and gained consistency under one or the other of the two earlier cultural schemes. The peaceable variant is the product of the savage regime and the predatory variant the product of the barbarian regime. Although they had survived both were "archaic" in that they were shaped by circumstances that existed in the past and were, therefore, better suited to those circumstances than to those of today. Consequently, human nature could not remain fixed. Under the new exigencies of life the older variants were being transformed once more by the process of selective adaptation. So, what needs to be examined is how the different cultural regimes have acted to shape the different variants of human nature.

The savage period of cultural growth covered by far the longest absolute time in human history. Like Lewis Henry Morgan, Veblen divides the savage culture into three stages: lower, middle, and higher. Unlike Morgan, Veblen is unclear about the exact distinctions between each stage, although at the first approximation they are, apparently, economic.

Improvements in technology allow for a greater control over

⁷ Veblen seems to intend "eliminate" to mean the death of those who fail to adapt, or at least the dwindling of that line of descent.

the material conditions of life and these improvements accompany, and probably cause, a change in the overall cultural scheme.

Veblen recognizes that any discussion of the earliest days of mankind is largely speculative and that the story he presents, in broad outline, is "presumptive:" it is an exercise in conjectural history. Even resort to the comparative method gives little insight into the lowest stage of savagery as no existing human group can be taken because representing that stage of development.

The savage regime commenced at whatever point in history humans emerged as a distinct species. Whatever their other attributes might have been, their economic capabilities were little above those of other animals. They possessed only the most rudimentary technology with a few ineffectual tools and weapons. Hence, their ability to manipulate the material environment to their benefit was severely limited. They lived by gathering the vegetation and capturing what smaller animals came within their reach. The lack of effective weapons prevented them hunting the larger beasts.

The crude technology made existence precarious for the individual and even the species as a whole. At that time the human species faced the same dangers of elimination as other animals in the struggle for existence, although, of course, humans did prove sufficiently astute to survive. Moreover, the primitive level of technology determined the way of life

humans would have to adopt in order to survive the selective forces of nature.

Veblen commenced his speculations on the initial mode of life with the universally held assumption that early mankind, like existing savages, lived in a state of chronic want. This proposition usually supported the argument that early human groups must have lived in a state of perpetual, physical conflict with each other for nature's meager bounty. As he so often does, Veblen begins with a generally accepted premise only to arrive at an alternative conclusion. He believed, on Darwinian grounds, that the very difficulty of securing adequate nutrition would prevent conflict as any species that devoted its time to contest rather than to work would be driven into extinction, given the low level of technology of that time.⁸

The difficulties facing the earliest humans were no different from those of any other species; they must survive and reproduce. They could extract little from the environment so they could only live in small groups, each roaming over a relatively large territory in isolation from other groups.

The struggle for existence proceeded between the group and its material environment, not between groups, or among the individuals within the group. The survival of the

⁸ Many anthropologists reconciled the state of chronic want with habitual conflict by assuming that the reward of the victors was to eat the vanquished. Veblen does not address in his own work the possibility of cannibalism.

individual depended on the survival of the group and time was mostly occupied with getting a livelihood. The groups had no knowledge of raising crops or domesticating animals, and no means of storage or transportation. Consequently, they had little "on hand" worth other groups trying to plunder.

The economy of the savage regime produced only subsistence. All members of the group had to work, as the survival of the group depended on the contributions of all. Little discrimination existed between occupations preventing a system of class emerging, and as the savage economy produced no surplus it could not support a leisure class, either rising up within the group or by one group conquering another.

Veblen does not suggest that life for the early savage was one of slavish devotion to securing the means of existence. In fact, the savage was probably a fairly inefficient and indolent character by the economic standards of later days. At heart the savage was concerned for the welfare of the group and displayed a proclivity towards furthering the fullness of life of the human race.

The exigencies of the situation enforced adaptation upon the early savage. However, this was not merely a behavioral adjustment of a fixed human nature to the prevailing circumstances. Human nature itself was molded into the savage form through the process of selective adaptation. Just as the instinct of workmanship was enforced upon the race by the

requirements of biological survival, so too were the other traits that constituted the savage character.

As early humans lived communally, savage human nature would be gregarious, with a sense of group solidarity. As competition within or between groups was detrimental to survival of the species, savage traits would be peaceable instead of contentious. Any group who tried to live by exploit would perish, just as any group with an aversion to work would perish. Variations in temperament might appear but those that were harmful would be repressed or eliminated. In other words, those traits best adapted to the early savage regime would survive, while those ill adapted would be eliminated through selective adaptation.

Humanity in the lowest stage of savagery was in the same position as any other species. It survived through adaptation, by finding a niche in the environment that allowed it to secure a livelihood and produce offspring. Early mankind was subject to the same forces of selection as other animals and the early human traits were the result of those forces. The forces Veblen incorporates in selective adaptation combine natural selection with Lamarckism. However, Veblen claims the particular process is not that important for his argument, and that the same result would be reached by substituting the Darwinian or Spencerian terms. His point is that the traits enforced on early humanity were

incorporated into human nature and handed down by inheritance.

Although humans had only a slight advantage over other species in the struggle for existence when they first appeared on the human plane, they possessed something that gave them a long-term advantage over all other creatures, intelligence. Beyond any of the higher animal humans could reflect upon their actions and aims, and devise new ways and means to accomplish their ends. Slowly, over many thousands of years, humans developed a body of knowledge and a corresponding stock of tools that increasingly distanced them from any other animal in the struggle for existence. As a species they had attained liberation from the law of natural selection, at least in its economic dictates. Improved technology allowed humanity to secure a living on reasonable terms; terms so reasonable that they could increasingly dissipate some of their substance in pursuit of a differential advantage. An economic surplus allowed exploit, ownership, and a leisure class.

Technological improvement, then, seems to be the primary causal factor that created, or at least allowed, the development of the barbarian scheme of life. Veblen's discussion of the process of transition is somewhat vague as, for one thing, there was little evidence of how this change had come about. An additional reason for this vagueness appears to be Veblen's specific interest at this time.

Perhaps because he was unable to articulate the processes of change, or perhaps guided by the socialist literature he had been reading and reviewing, Veblen focuses more on the distinctive characteristics of the different cultural stages than the exact steps by which one stage evolved into the next.⁹ The socialist influence is evident in his concern with the leisure class. Veblen is well aware that for a leisure class to emerge the industrial class must produce a surplus above its own subsistence, and that this would require improvements in technology. There is the suggestion, therefore, that this technological progress moves societies through the different levels of each cultural stage eventually resulting in a change in the cultural scheme. However, Veblen's claim that a cumulative process constantly changes society is really no more than an assertion at this time. First, he offers no explanation for why technology changes; second, all the factors in social evolution that Veblen does analyze in some detail--biological heredity, habitual patterns of behavior, the conservative nature of the institutional structure--imply stasis rather than change. It could be said that Veblen never provided a detailed or coherent explanation of how institutions evolved and that, instead of analyzing evolution, his theoretical framework

⁹ During the 1890s Veblen wrote a large number of book reviews for the *Journal of Political Economy*. Most of the books he reviewed were treatises on socialism. These reviews are collected in Veblen 1973.

actually compared the characteristics of one cultural scheme with another after the evolution had occurred.

Be that as it may, Veblen does identify the beginnings of barbarism with an economic surplus that permits and encourages exploit, the seizure of property and its individual ownership, and the patriarchal household through the seizure of women. This ability to live by preying on others changed the social environment. No longer was the struggle for survival mainly between the group and the natural environment; rather it was a struggle between the members of the group. Gradually the predatory regime became the one to which people had to adapt, and those lines of descent that failed to adapt were eliminated.

If the variations that occur among any population are biological and heritable, then the persistence of the most recent stable variant is easily explicable; the population will breed true to this variant until the exigencies of life produce a new variant. But what causes the reversion to an earlier variant of human nature? Veblen offers several suggestions.

First, there is the relative duration of the two eras. The barbarian stage was of long absolute duration compared with what followed, but it was relatively short when compared with the earlier savage stage, as the savage stage had covered the vast majority of human history. Thus for an enormous expanse of time the "discipline" of the savage

regime shaped the human material to its requirements. Veblen seems to suggest that the process of selective adaptation can more thoroughly shape human nature into any form the longer it can subject the human material to a particular scheme of life. The long coercive discipline of savagery etched the peaceable traits so deeply into the human psyche that the shorter period of barbarism had been insufficient to eradicate them. Hence Veblen takes the savage variant to represent the more "generic" type of human nature, and the one to which humans tend most readily to revert. From this perspective the predatory variant has only cast a thin veneer of barbarism over the generic, peaceable type.

Veblen's use of generic type is curious. In the biological sciences generic type referred to the traits of the species taken as representative of the genus. If one takes the traits of the peaceable variants as typical for the genus, this suggests, once again, that Veblen saw the races of mankind as distinct species forming a genus.

A second possibility concerns the "symmetry" of the different variants, rather than the duration of adaptation to any regime. According to Veblen the ante-predatory or peaceable variant had "a greater stability and greater symmetry in the distribution or relative force of its temperamental elements." The predatory variant "had not attained a high degree of consistency or stability," so this variant of human nature was not "nearly uniform in respect of

the range or the relative strength of the various aptitudes and propensities which go to make it up."¹⁰

The significance of this instability seems to arise from the same phenomena of heredity that Veblen employed when discussing hybridization. The ethnic types had mixed for thousands of years without producing a new, stable variety. These hybrid lines of descent would revert to one of the stable, parent types. This tendency for the variant of the hereditary present to revert to a more archaic version of human nature would appear to rest on similar grounds. Nevertheless, a significant difference does occur. Unlike the hybrid varieties that were able to secure no purchase among the European population, the predatory variant had established itself in Europe for many thousands of years. Apparently, the difference lies in the nature of the hereditary process. For some purely biological reason a hybrid type could not survive among the population. The predatory variant, on the other hand, owed part of its success, in terms of persistence, to the cultural

¹⁰ Veblen 1975[©1899], 216. In biology the "law of symmetry" referred to the observed occurrence of morphological symmetry in species; one side of the body was a reverse image of the other. Traits that varied from this law, e.g., cows born with one horn, were unstable and disappeared in the next generation. Lapouge had made an application of this law to temperament, believing the dolicho-blond was unstable as its members supposedly possessed widely fluctuating temperaments showing either that of the aristocrat or that of the delinquent, whereas the Alpine was more balanced. Apparently, Veblen makes a similar distinction between the barbarian and savage variants whose traits correspond in many respects to the blond and the Alpine.

environment. The barbarian regime provided an environment conducive to the cultivation of the predatory traits; the barbarian regime is really little more than the exercise of predation. Under this regime the process of selective adaptation established the predatory variant and kept it viable, despite its potential instability, through a constant re-enforcement of barbarian attitudes.

The barbarian environment acted upon the modern population to preserve the predatory variant both by adapting human nature to the requirements of a predatory life and by selecting those most fit for the barbarian scheme, and alternatively eliminating those lines of descent found least fit. This selective adaptation of favorable variation, combined with the tendency for the population to breed true to the predatory variant of the hereditary present acted to establish the barbarian temperament within the modern population.

A position in the leisure class was the mark of predatory success under the barbarian regime. Unfortunately, such success was practicable for only a fraction of the population. A life of leisure was unsupportable for society as a whole, and thus a sizable portion of the populace must work to supply the means by which the successful predators might live. This returns us, from a different perspective, to the views Veblen addressed in "The Instinct of Workmanship

and the Irksomeness of Labour."¹¹ Work was irksome, spiritually if not physically, to anyone thoroughly acclimated to the barbarian regime. It was irksome because it was ignoble, and this assessment was appreciated by the barbarian variant whether aristocratic or servile. Nonetheless, the necessity for any community to require work from some of its members acted to conserve the peaceable traits throughout the barbarian period, no matter how spiritually demeaning this might feel to those forced to work.

The peaceable traits had survived under the protracted barbarian discipline in two ways. First, a large segment of the population would never have moved far from the workmanlike propensities of the savage stage as their ancestors and descendants never escaped the discipline of diligent labor. Although this section of the populace might live in the midst of barbarism, and find itself ill used on occasions, the harsher barbarian realities might touch them only intermittently or lightly. Second, for those lines of descent with an innate appreciation for the niceties of barbaric etiquette, work would constitute an irksome indication of servile status. Yet, in Veblen's apprehension, the coercive education of diligent labor would tend to mitigate the grip of barbarian attitudes and allow the savage

¹¹ Veblen 1998e[©1898].

proclivities to retain a foothold, if only a precarious one, on the otherwise predacious terrain. Hence, the experience of work rather than combat, even if under coercion, would weaken the barbarian animus in those sections of the population that could not pursue leisure as a vocation.

Even at its best--that is, at its most severe--the barbarian regime did not exert the same unbroken sway over the populace as the savage regime had once done. While the savage regime could proceed without resort to predation, the barbarian regime could not survive without a continuation of the peaceable activities of the earlier life-style, whether those engaged in the production of needful things found the pursuit fulfilling or debasing. Or, to be more exact, a leisure class could not sustain itself under the barbarian regime without a servile class to rest upon.

Persistence of Archaic Traits Into Modern Civilization

This relationship of mastery and servility is the relationship as applied to the whole community. How the spiritual impact of the barbarian scheme was distributed in any community depended, to some extent, on the relationship between the elevated and depressed classes. The leisure class and the industrial class might both occupy the same barbarian cultural level. This might occur through internal ascent, or through one barbarian group conquering another and establishing itself in a position of supremacy. In this

situation, work would necessarily appear irksome and demeaning to the lower class. Alternatively, if the lower class was initially savage when conquered by a barbarian invader, the two classes might continue at essentially different cultural levels. In such a situation the savage traits might simply be preserved among the industrial class without undergoing great alteration, thus being ready to reassert themselves if the appropriate circumstances should arise.

Veblen believes that such circumstances arose under the modern industrial regime. The new scheme of life was directed increasingly by the machine process. The discipline this process imposed upon the members of society differed from that of the barbarian regime and worked to establish a different range of aptitudes and propensities among the population wherever its influence extended. The traits of savage human nature fitted better within the spiritual attitude required by the machine than did the predatory animus of the barbarian. Consequently, the full-blooded barbarian mood of the feudal period had abated during the quasi-peaceable and modern times and no longer exercised such a severe coercive surveillance over the European peoples.

That is not to say that a barbarian frame of mind could not be turned to good account still. The grip of barbarism had relaxed upon the industrial classes, but among the non-industrial classes the barbarian theory of life continued to

hold court. Here, the barbarian regime had formerly distributed society's rewards to the successful predator, and here, under its abiding influence, the rewards continued thus to be allotted. In matters of "higher import" than providing for society's material need--matters of law, religion, politics, and war--success demanded a healthy appreciation for the barbarian standards of worth.

Even modern industrial technology was administered under old-fashioned barbarian principles and was exploited to achieve the old ends. The machine process, in its scope and magnitude, was of relatively recent development, as were many of the business practices that turned this process to account. However, the aims and motives of the business interests were still guided by the emotional content of the barbarian regime, and under its lasting surveillance had been developed into another means of securing good repute through a personal besting of all competitors in the pecuniary challenge.

The barbarian regime had stood-over into the modern era with sufficient vigor to provide ample scope for exercising the predatory temperament. Survivals from the older scheme of life were due to the hereditary persistence of barbarian traits among the population and a cultural environment that still provided sustenance for these traits in many areas of society. Yet in other areas of activity barbarian sanctions had lost their force, allowing any reversion to the generic

type to avoid the elimination and repression that was once their lot.

Such a release from coercive discipline was not only accorded to the industrial masses; the relief extended to sections of the leisure class itself. The dissipation of the barbarian imperative that commenced during the quasi-peaceable stage had moderated adaptive and selective pressures even among the higher ranks of society. The perpetuation of pecuniary security combined with reprieve from the unmitigated repression of predatory force allowed any reversions that appeared among the leisure class to escape the erstwhile binding sanctions of good form. Veblen argued that since fraud had increasingly supplanted force as the cardinal virtue and chief avenue to social esteem, the current adepts of leisure were correspondingly relieved of the battle-ready caution of the warrior breed. For those who were sheltered by wealth from the immediate pressures of the pecuniary struggle, reversion to a more peaceable temperament might occur without any necessary reprisal being administered by a hostile environment. Hence, at both ends of the social scale, the peaceable traits of savagery were enjoying a revival in the more tranquil light of the modern industrial environment.

The relief afforded to those who filled the higher rungs of society, through the mitigation of predatory sanctions, was balanced, to some extent, by the intensity of the

struggle for existence among those who occupied the bottom end of the pecuniary ladder. The need to secure a livelihood under the precepts of the pecuniary culture meant that the industrial classes were exposed to a competitive struggle that reimposed the predatory attitudes that the machine process worked to eliminate. Hence, even among that section of the populace most immediately subject to the machine discipline, and whose temperament was most consistently shaped towards an appreciation of mechanical cause and effect, a regard for the predatory virtues was cultivated by the pecuniary realities of existence.

Variants Under the Pecuniary Culture

Veblen reveals the biological nature of these variants in his assessment of the conservation of the older traits and the impact of the modern industrial regime. The people of the modern occidental nations breed true to the barbarian variant of human nature, because for the people of European descent this variant constituted the hereditary present. However, a tendency persisted for reversion to the older peaceable variant because it represented the more generic type of human nature. These reversions had a greater chance of survival under the modern industrial scheme than under the full-blow version of barbarism, because the prevailing exigencies no longer favored the predatory variant, at least in its more violent manifestation, as remorselessly as it once had.

The mysterious laws of heredity continued generating these archaic traits and modern circumstances conserved them by accommodating them within the existing social order. Nevertheless, the vagaries of modern life differed from those under which the older traits had emerged and become fixed upon the population. The industrial and pecuniary activities of modern society required temperamental characteristics that deviated from both those of the savage and of the barbarian. The machine process and the exigencies of business enterprise had begun the task of reshaping human nature into a form more compatible with their needs.¹²

The human nature that evolution was selecting for modern industrial society varied from both of the variants that survived out of the earlier cultural schemes. Its general difference lay in "its greater stability of aim--greater singleness of purpose and greater persistence of effort."¹³ Moreover, this line of development had two divergent threads due to the distinct selective pressures at work. Veblen distinguished these two modern variants of human nature by the various propensities and aptitudes the modern environment

¹² "Life in a modern industrial community, or in other words life under the pecuniary culture, acts by a process of selection to develop and conserve a certain range of aptitudes and propensities. The present tendency of this selective process is not simply a reversion to a given, immutable ethnic type. It tends rather to a modification of human nature differing in some respects from any of the types or variants transmitted out of the past." Veblen 1975[©1899], 238.

¹³ Veblen 1975[©1899], 239.

acted to conserve. In their "capacities and aptitudes," these two variants were identified as the "pecuniary" and the "industrial." In terms of their "propensities, spiritual attitude, or animus" they were called "the invidious or self-regarding," and "the non-invidious or economical." In terms of their "intellectual or cognitive bent" their chief characteristics were, respectively, "the personal standpoint, of conation, qualitative relation, status, or worth," and "the impersonal standpoint, of sequence, quantitative relation, mechanical efficiency, or use." Each different cognitive bent and set of aptitudes and propensities tended to coalesce in different individuals as taken together each combination formed a particular human "temperament."¹⁴

The temperament of the industrial variant of human nature marks the largest change from the archaic traits conserved in the modern regime. The discipline of industry tends to make this variant peaceable and workmanlike. In this direction the industrial variant is similar to the peaceable variant under savagery. But this is only a general similarity. In detail, the requirements of the modern machine technology develop and conserve a set of traits alien to the savage temperament. For example, where the savage had been inefficient, indolent, and in possession of a healthy animistic view of things, the industrial variant tends to

¹⁴ Veblen 1975[©1899], 239.

apply persistent and efficient effort, and to conceive relationships in terms of impersonal cause and effect.

The pecuniary variant of human nature remained far closer to the predatory variant because, to a large degree, the modern pecuniary culture was simply an extension of barbarian values to pecuniary competition. Fraud had replaced force, causing a substitution of bourgeois virtues for aristocratic virtues in the barbarian temperament. However, even if the methods differed, the ends of action were essentially the same, as was the spiritual appreciation of the process.

The distinction between the pecuniary and industrial variants was somewhat marred by the pervasive influence of the pecuniary culture. No one in modern society entirely escaped its reach. A large portion of the population might have been engaged in industrial occupations rather than pecuniary employments, but the individuals who worked in even the most mechanized industries remained the same individuals when they sold their labor and spent their money within the pecuniary environment. Life in a modern industrial community also meant life in the pecuniary culture, and this inevitably involved participation in the pecuniary struggle.

Modern industry made possible a large increase in the material comforts of the population. Nevertheless, in the midst of this potential plenty the pecuniary struggle produced and maintained "an underfed class, of large

proportions."¹⁵ This class found itself engaged in a daily struggle just to meet its basic needs. The constant shortage of the means of life placed this class in a similar economic position to the lower savages. However, the causes of this shortage of necessities were very different, as were its consequences. The people on the lower levels of savagery encountered difficulty in providing for their material needs because of their meager technology. In order to adapt to this circumstance the members of the savage group necessarily occupied themselves with questions of work and cooperated in their endeavors for the good of the group as a whole. The presence of want under the pecuniary culture resulted from the leisure class "withdrawing as much of the means of life as may be from the lower classes."¹⁶ The underclass responded to their difficulties not through the pursuit of activities that would develop the industrial and communal aptitudes and propensities, but through a more narrowly self-seeking pursuit of a pecuniary return. Thus, the pecuniary culture worked to conserve the barbarian animus among the lower classes, despite their closer experiences of the industrial process.

Veblen did not attribute the hardships of the lower class to a mere shortage of the physical necessities of life.

¹⁵ Veblen 1975[©1899], 243.

¹⁶ Veblen 1975[©1899], 244.

The troubles of this class had their origin less in any absolute shortage of sustenance and shelter, and more from the struggle to meet the standards of decent living legislated by the pecuniary culture. Veblen's strictures on the presumed irksomeness of labor applied with equal force to presumed pleasures of consumption. Veblen reversed the wisdom of the hedonistic economics by arguing that humans had no inherent aversion to work. The human sense of discomfort was more frequently a spiritual fact than a physical torment. In all societies above the savage plane, and at all social levels within these societies, even at the lowest levels, the canons of reputability in force at any time directed expenditures along lines designed to provoke an invidious comparison. Maintaining status within the community entailed allocating a considerable portion of income to expenditures that contributed little towards physical comfort. The goal of such spending was to affirm or enhance a person's sense of self-worth; self-worth being calculated by one's own estimation of how one stood in the estimation of others; the estimation of others being based, in turn, on an appropriate demonstration of ability to pay. Consumption, to give full satisfaction, must be conspicuous.

Here, as in much of his analysis, Veblen arrived at conclusions contrary to the accepted wisdom among economists. The legend of "economic man" attached to the solitary individual who derived his only satisfaction from isolated

consumption of "goods," and his only pain from the lonely execution of "labor." In Veblen's land, human beings had an instinctive appreciation for work, not as senseless toil, but as a purposeful activity yielding a social benefit. This at least was the meaning of workmanship when the instinct had been fixed upon the earliest humans. This instinct became so deeply entrenched in human nature that the worker still gained satisfaction from useful work, even if it was performed in isolation or not even for his own benefit.

When the individual was analyzed as consumer the social significance of the activity was again central to Veblen's view. Only a fraction of "consumption" expenditure actually contributed to human comfort in any physical sense. Rather than the physical comfort of an isolated individual, the purpose of most expenditure was the spiritual or psychic comfort of a social being. In Veblen country, only a tenuous connection existed between expenditure on consumption goods and physical comfort. Indeed, to fulfill its social purpose of displaying the owner's wealth, expenditure was often deliberately directed towards activities that diminished the possible level of comfort, or even imposed discomfort. Veblen's discussion of woman's dress and the furnishings and trappings in God's house being cases in point. Veblen's analysis led to an ironic conclusion, ironic from the perspective of utilitarian economics. Individuals could get personal satisfaction from the consumption of goods, both in

terms of comfort and from a sense of social esteem. However, they also incurred, at times more strongly, a spiritual dissatisfaction from the failure to consume those commodities they felt were necessary for their position in society.¹⁷

Unlike the classical economists, Veblen saw the consumption of wealth as a social activity.¹⁸ To be enjoyed expenditure on consumption had to be displayed, and it had to incite an invidious comparison and create an invidious distinction. Those who failed to achieve the appropriate displays of pecuniary competence through their expenditure were reduced in their own estimation and, at least in their own minds, in the esteem of others. They felt envy towards those who signaled success in the socio-economic struggle by exhibiting a superior force through spending.

This envy was provoked among the toiling class by the example of the leisure class, who set the measure for excellent living that the rest tried to emulate. But more significantly, it was provoked within each class and sub-

¹⁷ Veblen denied that the neoclassical or Austrian economists had a theory of *consumption*, or production for that matter. What their scientific contribution actually amounted to was a theory of the distribution of pecuniary values. This appraisal is still valid.

¹⁸ In Veblen's work this disutility, if I may use the term, from non-consumption is a social phenomenon, and should in no way be confused with the disutility from non-consumption discussed among the utilitarian economists with regard to, for example, the pain of foregoing consumption in order to save, or the (implicit) pain, in terms of opportunity cost, of consuming one good instead of another. This is entirely a private matter between economic man and his utility function.

class by a constant struggle to establish social standing over others, particularly within the comparable income group.

Veblen believed this proclivity to pecuniary emulation was one of the psychological traits associated with the instinct of sportsmanship. These competitive, predatory traits provided the animus for the individuals who lived within the barbarian regime and who perpetuated that regime though their personal striving for invidious distinction.

The discussion presented above attempts to highlight those aspects of human behavior that Veblen associated with biological traits. Needless to say, the details of this behavior were not dictated by the individual's biological composition. These innate traits provided only the drive toward certain types of behavior and an associated (spiritual) appreciation of certain forms of conduct. This claim, so far as it goes, is entirely in line with the currently held views on Veblen's theory of human nature. The current interpretation deviates from the standard view in its assessment of the impact that the ambient social environment has on human nature. It is well enough known that in *The Leisure Class* Veblen divided human nature into instinctive components that were broadly identified as "workmanship" and "sportsmanship". What has received little attention is the continual adjustments in human nature that Veblen believed took place even in modern society. The instinctive

dispositions of the population are constantly being tested and adjusted to the circumstances of life facing the different lines of descent and the individuals who compose those line. The biological foundations of human nature had not become permanently fixed the race at some obscure time in the distant past. The evolutionary process still acted to shape the different traits of human nature.

Veblen attributed these traits to human adaptation to a changing environment and the selective influence this environment exerted upon the human subject. This process of selective adaptation had produced and conserved the different ethnic types. It had also produced those variants of human nature that overlapped with the ethnic types and that changed with the changing circumstances.

Scholars have accepted that Veblen intended ethnic types as a biological category, although they generally find that it contributes little of importance to Veblen's theory. Alternatively, the theoretical significance of variant, if it has one, has received very little attention. This neglect can easily be attributed to Veblen's scant and ambivalent use of the term. First, Veblen only refers to the concept in *The Leisure Class* and then only elaborates on its meaning in one chapter of that book. This might be taken to imply that Veblen considered variant to be relatively unimportant. However, it occurs where Veblen attempts one of his major elaborations of the evolutionary process, and it plays an

important, though equivocal, part in that process. Veblen provides surprisingly little detailed analysis of the evolutionary process in any of his work, so his inclusion of variants as a major factor indicates that he considered it important for his theory at that time. In fact, he appears to have considered it as his original contribution to evolutionary theory.

Veblen largely borrowed the discussion of ethnic types from the existing ethnological and anthropological literature and added little to this aspect of the topic. On the other hand, he considered that ethnologists had neglected the significance of variations of the existing ethnic types under the different disciplines imposed by the different cultural stages of social evolution. These variations are what Veblen called variants. As he said:

This necessary variation of the types themselves, due to a selective process of considerable duration and of a consistent trend, has not been sufficiently noticed by the writers who have discussed ethnic survival.¹⁹

¹⁹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 214. See also 244: "But little if anything has been done towards collecting or digesting data that are of special significance for the question of survival or elimination of traits in the modern population." This statement concerns the "modern" population and again supports my argument for ongoing biological evolution.

Second, some ambiguity surrounds "variant" as a concept because variants emerge from an interaction of biology and culture that tends to be mutually reinforcing through a cumulative process. Unfortunately, this interaction is not well defined in Veblen's analysis. In several places, Veblen distinguishes his own evolutionary process from that associated with Herbert Spencer. However, if Veblen's process is different, it still suffers from a similar problem: it is impossible to tell where culture ends its role in human behavior and the role of biology begins. At times Veblen says that he is uncertain of where the dividing line lay. So, due to Veblen's limited exposition and ambivalent treatment of the concept, the biological aspect of variants seems to have escaped attention in the literature.

The Role of Culture

It is generally established in the literature that Veblen did see biology as playing a role in human behavior. Humans had a series of "instincts" that had been imposed upon them through a Darwinian process of natural selection. Some disagreement exists on the exact limits of these instincts, particularly whether they include any "learned" behavior.²⁰ Still, it is generally agreed that they provide a vague (non-specific) impulse to action.

²⁰ See Mitchell 1914, Hodgson 1992.

However, the instinctive content of human action is taken to have been fixed upon humanity sometime in the remote past and to exert little direct influence upon human behavior. Instincts might compel individuals to act, but how they act and toward what they direct their actions are not determined by human biology but by culture. The main determinant of individual action, often the only one, is taken to be habit.

Individuals acquire their view of the world, their theory of life, from their culture; they learn it. Most of what they think and feel, most of what they know and do has not been acquired by a process of rational analysis. It has been largely adopted, without reflection, from the social environment in which they act out their lives. In large measure life is a process of habit formation. Habits of thought conform to habits of life. When habits of life change under the changing exigencies of the situation, habits of thought adjust, more or less quickly, until they are brought into a new correspondence with the new habits of life. When any group of people share the same habits of life, as will inevitable happen under associated living, they develop the same habits of thought. A collective habitual view regarding any one relation or subject constitutes an institution. The collection of institutions in force constitutes the culture of any particular society.

These institutions, taken together, have some degree of coherence among themselves; they form a consistent whole, at least to the satisfaction of the members of society, because they all emanate from the same point of view. Hence institutions do not represent a consensus of detached assessments of discrete social arrangements and relations, each evaluated on its individual merits. Rather, they represent the appreciation of all social arrangements and relations from a single perspective and by a single standard of evaluation; single in that it is adopted and accepted by the generality of members of the community. This point of agreement is established as a matter of course through habitual patterns of life, and the mesmerizing example of the existing social consensus. Once established, this point of view organizes the facts that pass before it into conformity with the currently held theory of life. The existing institutional structure will maintain itself so long as the facts of existence that impinge upon each person do not deviate too violently from the vision of reality embodied in the prevalent theory of life. Just so long as new facts can be readily accommodated within the current theory of life the individual members of society have no incentive to change their habitual view of things; as no change in the institutional structure is required, none will follow.

If under changing circumstances of life the facts proceeding from one or more sources no longer fit the

accepted point of view, individuals feel a compulsion to change their viewpoint, form new habits of thought and form new institutions. Given the cohesion that exists among institutions, a change in the point of view from which one set of facts is evaluated will necessarily involve some alteration in the assessment of all sets of facts. A new point of view will become established and a new theory of life put into effect. As people adjust their view of reality to encompass the new facts, the old reality that once seemed beyond question begins to lose its substance, and even the old facts seem less tangible, under the new dispensation, than they once did.

Each individual is born into a social environment (a culture). This social environment is the web of institutions in force at any particular moment. Individuals adopt these habitual views as a matter of course, and provided that their own habits of life accord adequately with this institutional structure, they will accept it as right and good. In accepting the existing institutions or, rather, in finding no grounds for rejecting them, individuals uncritically add their own support to the existing cultural scheme and sanction the existing viewpoint and system of social relations.

Once in force, these institutions are reinforced through a cumulative process. Once habituated to the existing institutional scheme people lend it their support. This acts

to maintain the habitual view of other members of society and to establish this view among new members. Sanctioned by time and custom and the pervading common sense of the community, these institutions will persist indefinitely unless a change is forced upon them. Individuals will not, and perhaps cannot, change their habits of thought without compelling reasons to do so.

Culture based interpretations of Veblen's theory have pushed his opinions on biology into the background. The accredited view on his uses of biology is that human nature, as determined mostly by instincts, was fixed sometime in the distant past, and that although Veblen believed in some racial distinctions along biological lines he argued that the influence of race on behavior is remote. Consequently, *changes* in human behavior are associated with changes in culture--that is, changes in institutions or habits of thought. Veblen is taken not as using evolutionary theory to explain the biological evolution of human beings, but to explain the process of socioeconomic change by directing attention towards the metaphorical evolution of institutions.

This depiction is accurate, but only for Veblen's later work. Veblen finally arrived at this conclusion shortly after he published *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* in 1915, and it was a conclusion he reached after some twenty years of evaluating the relative contributions to behavior of biology and culture.

However, it might be suggested that even in *The Leisure Class* Veblen ascribes changes in behavior to cultural causes, and that the human nature of which Veblen speaks is a matter of habits of thought or institutions, not biology. It can be allowed that ethnic type is a largely unimportant biological category and that in many passages Veblen attributes the evolution of human behavior to changes of habits. For example,

But apart from selection as between relatively stable types of character and habits of mind, there is no doubt simultaneously going on a process of selective adaptation of habits of thought within the general range of aptitudes which is characteristic of the dominant ethnic type or types. There may be a variation in the fundamental character of any population by selection between relatively stable types; but there is also a variation due to adaptation in detail within the range of the type, and to selection between specific habitual views regarding any given social relation or group of relations.²¹

This quotation seems completely in accord with the standard interpretation of Veblen's work as adaptation of habits of

²¹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 189-90.

thought to the prevailing cultural environment, combined with some manner of evolutionary selection among, presumably, competing institutions, where institution means habits of thought common to the generality of men. In fact, Veblen makes a very explicit statement to that effect while outlining the evolutionary process in *The Leisure Class*. When discussing the foundations of peaceable traits among humanity, Veblen appeals with apparent finality to the latest scientific approach to these matters:

Under the guidance of the later biological and psychological science, human nature will have to be restated in terms of habit; and in the restatement, this, in outline, appears to be the only assignable place and ground of these traits.²²

Habit, as opposed to instinct or propensity, is generally taken as a cultural rather than a biological category, making this a categorical denial of my claim that the variants should be treated as a biological phenomenon in Veblen's arguments. Veblen elaborates on this point by saying,

²² Veblen 1975[©1899], 221.

the process by which the traits were fixed and incorporated into the spiritual make-up of the type must have lasted for a relatively very long time and without serious intermission. The point is not seriously affected by any question as to whether it was a process of habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word or a process of selective adaptation of the race.²³

Taking these sentences together makes Veblen's meaning less certain. It is "human nature" that is to be restated in terms of habit, because these habitual traits are "incorporated into the spiritual make-up of the type." Now Veblen talks as if the cultural adoption of a habit is, or becomes, a biological trait. After a sure start Veblen appears to abandon any definite opinion on the matter in the final sentence quoted above. Here these traits might be cultural or they might be biological, "a process of habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word or a process of selective adaptation of the race."

If I have correctly interpreted the material on this topic, Veblen constructs an appallingly illogical argument, and on a point that is of some importance to his discussion. This, of course, is entirely unlike Veblen. I am arguing in this work that the problem of separating biological from

²³ Veblen 1975[©1899], 221.

cultural factors in human behavior creates a major difficulty for Veblen when he tries to expound the process of cultural evolution. Nevertheless, I find it impossible to accept that this could lead him to an argument this ludicrous. Many people disagree with Veblen's opinions and most people find that following his arguments often requires serious attention, but Veblen was too meticulous in his work ever to write nonsense.

An alternative interpretation is possible, but one that requires accepting a different meaning for habit in this passage, and perhaps throughout Veblen's writings of the 1890s. E. Anton Eff analyzes the same passage in his discussion of the relationship between Veblen and Herbert Spencer. Eff has no doubt that Veblen is referring to human evolution and not just cultural evolution in *The Leisure Class*. He also believes that Veblen was undecided on which evolutionary process to adopt. As Eff says, "A careful reading of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* leaves one with the impression that Veblen is being deliberately ambiguous, letting the reader choose whether to see the process as natural selection or as the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In fact, Veblen appears to say as much when discussing 'the conservation of archaic traits.'" Eff then quotes the passage I have cited, but instead of taking "habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word" to mean no more than a pattern of behavior acquired by repetition,

Eff concludes that "'Habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word' would certainly be Spencer's Lamarckism."²⁴

Eff's interpretation of habit as being inheritable in this context makes the passage more coherent. Veblen's argument becomes solely concerned with the process of human (biological) evolution as either a Darwinist selection or a Lamarckian inheritance of acquired traits. Veblen's conclusion is then that either process is compatible with the conservation of savage traits among the current European population.

Eff's interpretation gets further support as Veblen continues the discussion of these traits. First, Veblen denies that the savage traits could have come into existence and gained any degree of fixity during the relatively short period of barbarism and hence they must be of a much older origin.

It is entirely probable that these traits have come down from an earlier method of life, and have survived through the interval of predatory and quasi-peaceable culture in a condition of incipient, or at least imminent, desuetude, rather than that they have been brought out and fixed by this later culture. They appear to be hereditary characteristics of the race, and to

²⁴ Eff 1989, 701-2.

have persisted in spite of the altered requirements of success under the predatory and the later pecuniary stages of culture. They seem to have persisted by force of the tenacity of transmission that belongs to an hereditary trait that is present in some degree in every member of the species, and which therefore rests on a broad basis of race continuity.²⁵

Surprisingly, Eff avoids the usual cultural interpretation of these sections. Eff claims that the influence of Spencer has been neglected by Veblen scholars, and shows that a Spencerian interpretation of interlinked biological and cultural change fits the arguments Veblen sets down in *The Leisure Class*. Patterns of behavior repeated often enough become habitual and then hereditary, either directly through the inheritance of acquired habits, or indirectly through a selection of the best adapted habits of thought. In either case, Veblen once again operates in that obscure, gray area where learned behavior and biological inheritance overlap.

I will return to these issues shortly, but it might be worth pointing out here that Veblen implies that habits are inherited, whether the process is Lamarckian or Darwinian. If the contrast here is between a Lamarckian and a Darwinian

²⁵ Veblen 1975[©1899], 222.

process of heredity, and Veblen intends the process of selective adaptation as the same, or similar, to Darwinian natural selection, and if the origin of the savage traits is in habit, then even under the Darwinian scheme of natural selection habits must be heritable if, as Veblen says, they are, in fact, inherited. This contradicts the strict tenets of the neo-Darwinians, such as Augustus Weismann, who denied that acquired traits could be inherited. The neo-Darwinians held that new variation appeared in offspring at random, and that nature selected those variations that were favorable in the struggle for existence. New habits, in the usual sense of the word, cannot just appear in offspring at random, they are acquired during life through repetitive actions. Under a Lamarckian system they might then become heritable, but they could not be inherited in a neo-Darwinian world. This is one reason why I take Veblen as using selective adaptation as a compromise between natural selection and Lamarckism.

CHAPTER VI

VEBLEN'S PROBLEMS IN *THE LEISURE CLASS*

Veblen and Spencer

The last chapter ended with an examination of Anton Eff's interpretation of Veblen's evolutionary theory. Eff argues that Veblen used a very Spencerian view of socio-economic evolution in *The Leisure Class*, and points to numerous similarities between Veblen and Spencer that have been neglected or misinterpreted in the literature. A major exception is an article by Joseph Dorfman called "The 'Satire' in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*," published in the *Journal of Political Science* in 1932. Using frequent and numerous quotations, Dorfman makes an extensive comparison between the content of Veblen's book and the content of Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* in an attempt to counter arguments that *The Leisure Class* was simply a satire. Certainly no one has ever taken Spencer's work as satirical; consequently Dorfman shows the serious intent of *The Leisure Class* by outlining the parallels between that work and Spencer's sociology. Dorfman concludes that Veblen employed Spencer's evolutionary system, but that it led him to conclusions very different from Spencer's.

Since that article economists have tended to emphasize the differences between Spencer and Veblen and forget the similarities. Veblen shares a large part of the responsibility for this denial of similarities because his published comments on Spencer's work are largely critical, especially after 1900. Investigators have subsequently taken Veblen's statements at face value and have been led to see Veblen as an evolutionary "anti-Spencer."¹ However, most of Veblen's comments were not aimed at Spencer's evolutionary perspective, *per se*. They were designed to highlight the points on which Veblen diverged from Spencer--particularly on associationist psychology and on Spencer's teleological view of the evolutionary process.

Eff has provided a valuable service in drawing attention towards Veblen debt to Spencer, and I think an argument can be made that Spencer was the largest single influence on Veblen when he began his academic career in the 1890s. Still, Veblen never borrowed any theoretical materials without adjusting them to his own purposes and it was not only in his conclusions that Veblen differed from Spencer. Taking the views of Dorfman and Eff together, it is reasonable to claim that Veblen's starting point was Spencer's evolutionary theory.² He dropped various

¹ See, for example, the discussion of the "negative" influence of Spencer in Edgell and Tilman 1989, and compare Tilman 1996.

² William Daugert has suggested a similar possibility. He believes Veblen may have been guided by Spencer's analysis of social institutions into taking a similar approach to economic institutions,

components, such as the associationist psychology and teleology; modified others, such as distinctions between militant and industrial society; and added new components, such as the European racial anthropology and his own theory of variants. Credence is added to this possibility by Veblen's modification of Spencer's system in his early article, "Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism."³

Unfortunately, this 'cut and paste' approach led Veblen into trouble. Despite its faults, Spencer managed to bring the various parts of his system into some accord and create a reasonably coherent evolutionary theory. Veblen, on the other hand, failed to successfully blend the different theories he brought together, and the different parts of his framework pulled in different directions. This is clearly shown by Veblen's inability to arrive at a definite causal statement on any aspects of the evolutionary process. The purpose of the current chapter is to highlight the problems Veblen encountered in trying to explain the process of socio-economic change, and then examine the incompatibility of the theories he utilized to ascertain why he failed to establish a workable theory in the 1890s.

or, more accurately, the economic aspects of institutions. See Daugert 1950, 46-7.

³ Veblen said he offered his comments "in the spirit of a disciple." Curiously, given the previous note, Daugert thinks Veblen was being disingenuous with this "compliment." See Daugert 1950, 30-1.

Problems Veblen Acknowledged

Veblen provided one of his most extensive discussions of the evolutionary process in the middle chapters of *The Leisure Class*. However, the different strands of thought he tried to integrate had different implications for the causal sequence and Veblen constantly confronted ambiguous implications at important steps in the process.

First, Veblen equivocated over whether the evolutionary process was cultural or biological.

For the present purpose, however, the question as to the nature of the adaptive process--whether it is chiefly a selection between stable types of temperament and character, or chiefly an adaptation of men's habits of thought to changing circumstances--is of less importance than the fact that, by one method or another, institutions change and develop.⁴

Malcolm Rutherford has described this pronouncement as "an astonishing statement."⁵ Based on Veblen's own assessments, the purpose of the new, post-Darwinian economics was to provide a genetic account of the nature and causes of institutions. From that perspective this

⁴ Veblen 1975[1899], 190.

⁵ Rutherford 1998, 467.

quotation is indeed astonishing. It not only dismisses the importance of distinguishing cultural and biological factors in institutional evolution, but also dismisses the importance of explaining institutional change at all! If Veblen meant this statement to be taken literally, it undermined the whole Darwinian premise on which he launched his new evolutionary economics. This would reduce Veblen's "science" to nothing more than a description of institutions at different cultural stages.

Some critics, hostile to Veblen's approach, have alleged that his theory was no more than a description of institutions. This criticism is exaggerated, but not groundless. Veblen never clearly answers his central question of how institutions do in fact evolve, at least not in any concrete sense.⁶ Nevertheless, few people would deny that this constituted the central issue in Veblen's work, or that he addressed it from various perspectives over the course of his career. He certainly intended his work to constitute more than the description of institutions. Thus, this statement remains quite astonishing.

However, a tamer explanation may be offered for this statement. When Veblen says "for the present purpose," he might mean no more than "we don't need to worry about the

⁶ See the similar conclusions in Hodgson 1998 and Rutherford 1998. Veblen's failure in this respect is hardly surprising given the Herculean task he set himself.

details of the process for the issue I am currently discussing at this point in the book. We will return to those matters late." This seems in accordance with what Veblen actually did.

Veblen also equivocated on the appropriate manner of expressing the evolutionary process. Although he employed the phrase "selective adaptation," he denied that his conception of the process has a unique significance and that this process might be described just as accurately with other evolutionary expressions.

This conception of human evolution is not indispensable to the discussion. The general conclusions reached by the use of these concepts of selective adaptation would remain substantially true if the earlier, Darwinian and Spencerian, terms and concepts were substituted.⁷

Again this conclusion appears "astonishing." If Veblen had really tried to analyze an evolutionary process the terms utilized would be of great importance. Certainly, Darwin and Spencer both proposed evolutionary processes and their theoretical terms and concepts did overlap. For example, Darwin added the inheritance of acquired traits to

⁷ Veblen 1975[©1899], 217-8.

For the immediate purpose it need not be a question of serious importance whether this adaptive process is a process of selection and survival of persistent ethnic types or a process of individual adaptation and an inheritance of acquired traits.⁹

There are several difficulties with this passage. First, Veblen appears ambivalent over whether the process conforms to the Spencerian view of the inheritance of acquired traits, or the "selectionist" view, held by the anthropo-sociologists, of a Darwinian selection of persistent ethnic types. Second is the question of the unit of selection: the Spencerian process acts on the individual, while for the anthropo-sociologists the unit of selection is the race.

Another example of Veblen's equivocation over the correct biological process has already been mentioned in the last chapter when reviewing the opinions of Anton Eff. Eff gave coherence to one of Veblen's arguments by translating "habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word" as the inheritance of acquired traits. This made the passage in question a matter of contrast between Veblen's process of selective adaptation and Spencer's process of

⁹ Veblen 1975[©1899], 192.

acquired characteristics. This inability to distinguish between biological theories is similar to the previous problem.

Despite its attractions, Eff's translation is out of line with the usual interpretations of habituation in Veblen's work. Nevertheless, Eff could still be correct if Veblen meant "habits that then become hereditary traits," which seems to conform with the discussion provided by Veblen. An alternative view of this passage is that "habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word" means a non-inheritable frame of mind acquired through the repetition of actions and thoughts. This would make habit the cultural phenomenon it is usually taken to be.

Obviously, if Eff's interpretation were rejected, all of the problems of coherence that it solved would reemerge. In addition, we would move from a problem of distinguishing between biological processes to a problem of distinguishing the effects of biology from the effects of culture. So, when Veblen said,

The point is not seriously affected by any question as to whether it was a process of habituation in the old-fashioned sense of the word or a process of selective adaptation of the race,

Veblen disclaimed, again, any necessary distinction between cultural or biological causes for behavior.

There is no doubt that this distinction between biology and culture was difficult for Veblen because he drew attention to it in several places. For example, when Veblen discussed the distinction in temperament between the different classes of society, he said,

The whole question as to a class distinction in the spiritual make-up is also obscured by the presence, in all classes of society, of acquired habits of life that closely simulate inherited traits and at the same time act to develop in the entire body of the population the traits which they simulate.¹⁰

This passage illustrates one of the major difficulties encountered by Veblen and many other social inquirers of his time: if biology and culture both matter, how can you tell where one ends and the other begins?

This passage occurred as Veblen tried to analyze the influence of the pecuniary culture on the different classes of society. This analysis was complicated by the differing effects of the pecuniary and the industrial disciplines of modern society and also by the survival of archaic traits

¹⁰ Veblen 1975[©1899], 242.

among the current population. At each stage in cultural evolution the social structure became increasingly complicated. In large part this was caused by archaic traits surviving out of the past and influencing the modern scheme. Under the earliest cultural scheme, that of savagery, a clear-cut relationship existed between individual human nature and the prevailing cultural regime. The savage scheme of life bred a peaceable human nature, and the struggle for existence only tolerated a small range of deviations from the peaceable norm.

Technological progress expanded the scope for diversity by producing a surplus. This allowed individuals to express themselves in new and destructive ways without endangering the capacity of the human race to survive. Human progress, as marked by elevation to the state of barbarism, created a regime hostile to the peaceable traits of savagery. Yet, despite the anguish peaceful toil inevitably provoked among the predatory variants, they could not live by the sword alone. Work must still be done, even if under duress, and this kept the workmanlike habits alive, as did the tendency for people to revert inexplicably to the peaceable variant of human nature

Although the barbarian scheme of life was more elaborate than the savage regime, the temperamental make-up of the barbarians remained relatively simple: the population divided into those who could inflict damage with

success and everyone else. Under the quasi-peaceable regime and the later modern culture, a bellicose disposition became a less certain indication of noble lineage. The more temperate climate of the pecuniary regime cultivated predatory traits through the pursuit of business management and high finance, while the industrial scheme encouraged diligence and a mechanistic appreciation of facts. However, as previously discussed, the lower classes were subject to a predatory education in the pursuit of pecuniary gain, while members of the leisure class were freed from the earlier predatory discipline due to their pecuniary security. Hence the new cultural scheme was shaping human nature in new directions that no longer adhered to the established class demarcations.

The older forces of heredity, of course, continued to temper the effects the pecuniary culture exerted on human nature. The predatory variant still represented the typical European of the hereditary present, while reversion to the earlier peaceable variant proceeded with little restraint. In addition, the influence of the primordial racial heritage still counted for its share in shaping the final product of human character. Thus a person's peaceable disposition might be due to his racial disposition playing a large role in determining character, or his having reverted to an older, savage variant of human nature, or from having become habituated to a peaceable manner of life

through the discipline of the machine industry. It was impossible for Veblen to distinguish acquired habits of life from instinctive inclinations, even theoretically.

The Sources of Veblen's Difficulties

The difficulties Veblen encountered in attempting to explain human behavior were hardly unique. In fact, they are fairly typical of the problems laced throughout the social Darwinist literature of the time. My purpose has been to show that the conventional picture of Veblen as an early crusader for cultural instead of biological explanations is exaggerated. Like most of the social scientists that influenced his early work, Veblen believed that most of human behavior was directed by a human nature grounded in biological traits. However, this lay in the background of Veblen's writing; his immediate concern was to analyze the social phenomena of institutions rather than the biological factors that shaped them.¹¹ It was only when he attempted to detail the process of institutional evolution that biology was drawn into the argument to any significant degree.

However, unlike many of the social Darwinists, Veblen recognized and articulated the contradictions and ambiguities that arose when he tried to connect the

¹¹ Spencer's sociology can similarly be read with little regard for its biological basis.

biological and cultural realms. The point of the current work is to show that this was the case. Against the conventional representation of Veblen, I am arguing that during the 1890s he had not adopted a purely cultural explanation for human behavior. He was still in the confusing realm of social Darwinism, trying to integrate biological evolution into socioeconomic change. He was certainly not yet in accord with Franz Boas, who was fermenting the impending revolt against the uses of biology and evolution in social science. Veblen moved towards Boas' position after *The Leisure Class*, and, I believe, because of the problems with the evolutionary process he encountered in writing that book. Yet, although the role of biology declined in his writings, he never abandoned the belief that biological inheritance played an important role in shaping human behavior.

In "Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" Veblen claimed that the failure of the Classical and Austrian economists to make their economics evolutionary was mainly due to a faulty conception of human nature. The "economic man" who represented their average human being was a static recipient of pleasure and pain with no antecedent, not an active agent shaped by cultural and biological heritage. When the Classical economists who followed the Physiocrats and Adam Smith dropped the

animistic teleology that had given dynamism to the earlier economic theories, economics lost its motive force and came to a halt. From John Stuart Mill to Alfred Marshall, economists could conceive of little more than a static adjustment of economic magnitudes to a presumed "normal case" that lay behind the facts of existence. This type of economics was essentially a system of taxonomy.

Veblen tried to escape from this stasis by making the human agent the prime mover in economic events, the center of teleological action. For Veblen, the individual was an active agent, not a sponge for pleasure and pain. He believed that human behavior was the product of biological and cultural evolution, so he tried to combine these two in his model of the human agent. Biological evolution inculcated instinctive drives that impelled people to act in a manner that was purposeful. These innate drives had a differential distribution among the different human races, for reasons Veblen did not address directly at this time. On the average, members of different races had slightly stronger drives in slightly different directions.

Instincts drove individuals to seek the achievement of some general end. The ends sought, in their widest sense, were either social or selfish. The achievement of a social end was the aim of workmanship, while the self-regarding end was the target of sportsmanship. However, the specific end and the manner of encompassing it depended on the

prevalent cultural scheme. The predatory temperament of the sportsman, for example, might more appropriately procure an invidious distinction through physical combat under the barbarian regime than under the later pecuniary culture, where visiting ruin on recalcitrant competitors through the shrewd application of accredited business principles enhanced social prestige more readily than free resort to halberd or scimitar. Of course, whether the weapon of choice was hot money or cold steel would similarly vary with the habitual patterns of thought imbued in individuals by the social environment in which they acted and had their being. Based on this combination of biological and cultural inheritance, this combination of nature and nurture, Veblen tried to explain how the institutional structure of society evolved.

This attempt was only partly successful, and its failures lay in Veblen's conception of human nature. Veblen tried to combine the evolutionary theories of cultural anthropology, the racial theories of physical anthropology and the theories of biological evolution, but this eclecticism led him into difficulties. These models were incompatible with one another, basically because they each implied a different view of human nature.

Veblen's difficulties can be highlighted by considering the implications of the different views of human nature in physical and cultural anthropology, and the

different implications biological evolution carried for each.

Physical and Cultural Anthropology.

In Chapter 2 I followed Stocking in arguing that the physical and cultural anthropology of the late nineteenth century were affected less by the Darwinian revolution than was once imaged. In reality, they continued very much along the lines laid down in the late eighteenth century. The evolutionary anthropology of Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor grew out of the comparative method and the beliefs of the monogenists. There was a basic belief in the psychic unity of mankind, that is, that human nature was the same everywhere. The conjectural historians among Enlightenment philosophers paid no attention to the possible biological evolution of the human species, although later James Prichard did come close to formulating a theory of biological evolution in attempting to explain how the current varieties of mankind could have descended from a single, original pair of progenitors, as required in the Bible.

The polygenists denied the truth of psychic unity, believing instead that the diversity of human races resulted from separate acts of creation and therefore that each race represented a separate species. After geologists had vastly extended the age of the earth and Darwinism had

shown the possibility of biological evolution, the polygenists could replace separate acts of creation with primordial racial separation while retaining the same conclusion that, for any meaningful discussion of anthropology, the races of mankind were distinct and had distinct human natures. There was no psychic unity among human beings.

The legitimacy of the comparative method rested on the psychic unity of mankind and without this the stages theory of cultural evolution broke down. Psychic unity implied that human nature was the same in all places and at all times, and, as a corollary, the laws of progress were the same in all places and at all times. This permitted the presumption that the behavior of the Australian Aborigine resembled that of the Neolithic European because they both possessed a stone age culture. As Tylor put it:

It is no more reasonable to suppose the laws of mind differently constituted in Australia and in England, in the time of the cave-dwellers and in the time of the builders of sheet-iron houses, than to suppose that the laws of chemical combination were of one sort in the time of the coal-measures, and are of another now. The thing that has been will be; and we are to study savages and old nations to learn the laws that

psychically, were different through biological inheritance, and no matter how this had come about these differences had become fixed in the distant past. This amounted to a denial of psychic unity and the undermining of the comparative method, as now the laws of human progress would differ with the racial complex of the population.

Thus the laws of progress would not be the same everywhere. Some races might simply be unable to make progress through their own initiative and would remain forever at a primitive level of culture unless a superior race raised them up, to whatever extent that might be possible. This broke and even reversed the connection between the environment and the degree of racial progress. An inferior race would not progress no matter how benign the circumstances. The level of progress made in North America before and after the Europeans appeared is an obvious case in point. Indeed, progress seemed to accompany Europeans wherever they might roam. Some allowance could be made, of course, for particularly inclement climates, although this scarcely dented the general rule. Extreme racial determinists, like Georges de Lapouge, took this a stage further by separating the European population into distinct psychic types. The history of Europe then became a racial struggle, with civilization no longer inevitably progressing but currently teetering on the verge of collapse due to the relative decline of the dolicho-blond.

Although the different foundations of these theories made them hardly compatible, they were not held with any degree of consistency, which makes it difficult to follow many of the discussions of the time. Cultural anthropologists like Morgan and Tylor could tack on Lamarckian explanations for European superiority, while Lapouge could resort to environmental explanations for the decline of the dolicho-blond. This blur of cultural and biological beliefs gave wide scope for theoretical opportunism. If a particular biological theory hit a snag the cultural or physical environment could be called upon to explain the diversions from the natural course of events. Similarly, innate racial characteristics could descend, like a *deus ex machina*, to support flagging cultural theories. Like the economics of the time, every theory had its 'disturbing factors' that could temporarily divert the procession on its inevitable march to the terminus.

Veblen was far from alone, therefore, in holding these inconsistent beliefs. However, these inconsistencies became more prominent in Veblen's writing because he attempted to elucidate the details of institutional evolution. More than most writers of his time, Veblen focused on the mechanics of this evolutionary process, and this brought the incompatibilities in his theories into sharp focus. Veblen's cultural stages needed the psychic unity of

mankind, it needed the peaceable, generic human nature of the presumptive savage stage, not simply as a starting point for his theory of history but as a persistent feature of humanity that constantly attempted to reassert itself. Veblen could appeal to racial theory for a persistence of temperament among the different ethnic types, although, by definition, these ethnic types had different, persistent temperaments.

These two theories, while inconsistent with one another, had certain similarities. They both held that human nature had changed very little over the course of human history; consequently the palpable changes that had taken place could not be attributed to changes in the basic human material out of which society was constructed. For the cultural evolutionists, all humans possessed the capacity to build the highest cultures; the fact that some had not succeeded must then be attributed to environmental circumstances. For the racial anthropologists, social progress was the province of the few exceptionally endowed races, who, in pursuing their native gifts for culture building, might elevate or annihilate the less genetically gifted people. Fortune, blessed or ill, happened to put in their path. Hence, while the aggregate temperament of any society might vary with changes in the racial mix of its members, the individuals would maintain their racial integrity. So, on the one hand Veblen had two theories of

constant human nature that might attain a degree of logical coherence each on its own, yet would not conform with each other. To these Veblen added theories in which human nature changed.

Persistent Ethnic Types and Biological Variation.

Tylor and Morgan tentatively proposed biological modifications of human nature in their own cultural evolutionary theories. The modifications they had in mind were along the Lamarckian lines employed by Herbert Spencer: that changes in the surrounding milieu brought about corresponding changes in human nature. One of the tenets of the comparative system that enabled placing different societies on the evolutionary line was that the less complex preceded the more complex. Consequently, if culture was becoming more complex, and this could influence biological make-up through use and disuse of organs, then the brain of western Europeans would become larger and more complex than that of other peoples. This idea of universal progress and increased complexity constituted the central idea of Spencer's universal evolution. For Spencer human nature continually improved along with human culture as the result of a law of nature. Humanity progressed inevitably towards utopia.

Veblen's conception of "variants" elaborates upon the possible links between cultural change and biological

evolution and could be taken as some combination of the approaches of Tylor and Spencer. Both Tylor and Spencer had accepted the facts of cultural evolution, biological evolution, and distinct races, and had then combined them, in varying degrees, into their evolutionary theories. Spencer combined his Lamarckian theories of biological inheritance with the comparative method, which he used extensively in his sociology. However, Spencer avoided the difficulty of the psychic unity of mankind by denying that human nature was the same everywhere and substituting the claim that the laws of thought were the same everywhere. Hence, people in the same cultural conditions would tend to think in the same way. This introduced a cultural relativism into Spencer's analysis that the psychic unity of mankind could not really accommodate. For Spencer, psychological differences between Europeans and "primitives" were real and intimately connected with their respective cultural heritages. They saw the world in different ways. Of course, the major difference between Spencer and the later work of, say, Boas and Malinowski is that Spencer took these differences to be inheritable. Nonetheless, changes in the environment would change the methods of adaptation and habits of life, and these could become integrated into the biological make-up of the race. Hence, all human groups could be improved, more or less quickly, by changing the environment.

Without some such modification as that offered by Spencer, the belief in on-going biological evolution would upset the foundations of the comparative method by transforming human nature as culture changed. Similarly, it would undermine the foundations for belief in persistent racial types. If members of different races were exposed to the same conditions, and they adapted to them biologically, then even if distinct physical traits persisted, the racial temperaments would inevitably merge. Ethnic types could not possibly persist in the manner Lapouge envisioned. Life in France, for example, would tend to homogenize the blond, Alpine, and Mediterranean into the same psychic type; similarly for the other European nations, to the extent that their cultural conditions deviated. Even if the cultures of these nations were sufficiently similar that a European culture might be said to exist, this culture would work to produce a European type.

Veblen's use of variants did work in this direction by making the persistent ethnic types vary in different directions as the prevailing cultural regime changed. However, these variants, in Veblen's work, corresponded to the broad stages of the cultural evolutionists. Hence, the ethnic types of Europe, and elsewhere apparently, underwent a global adaptation to the global savage and barbarian regimes. Surprisingly, perhaps, Veblen talks very little about national characteristics in the 1890s. His analysis

runs in terms of the occidental or western culture, with its corresponding ethnic types and variants.

Exactly how biological evolution integrated with the cultural stages and the persistent ethnic types depends on the evolutionary process Veblen has in mind. Veblen referred to this as the process of selective adaptation. Unfortunately, what this process was, or even what it applied, is somewhat vague.

Veblen draws distinctions, in places, between his evolutionary process and those of Darwin and Spencer. However, at times he refers to "natural selection" as if the Darwinian theory was part of the process or even was the process that he was discussing. At other times, he talks of the inheritance of acquired traits as if his own process was at one with that of Herbert Spencer. As has already been pointed out, Veblen's discussion of the origin of instincts in "The Instinct of Workmanship" seemed to require the inheritance of acquired characteristics.

Exactly what Veblen believed to be evolving and to what the process of selective adaptation applied has received scant attention, and what discussion has taken place has generated little agreement. Geoff Hodgson claims that Veblen took Darwin's theory of natural selection and applied it, figuratively, to institutions. In Hodgson's re-articulation of Veblen's work, Veblen discovered a socio-economic analogy for the gene in the institution. Rick

Tilman also sees Veblen as using Darwinian natural selection as a metaphor for institutional evolution, although he treats the metaphor more loosely than Hodgson. Additionally, Tilman has suggested that Veblen *might* have treated biological evolution as part of the on-going evolutionary process, although he found "textual exigencies inconclusive."¹³

Malcolm Rutherford believes that Veblen took biological evolution as ending sometime in the distant past, before the last Ice Age in Europe. He similarly treats Veblen's theory as loosely Darwinian. However, unlike Hodgson, who thinks Veblen was relatively successful in applying Darwinian selection to economics, Rutherford thinks Veblen's work, was, in this respect, a failure rather than a success.¹⁴

Anton Eff approaches Veblen's work with a naively Spencerian eye and sees, I believe correctly, that Veblen was talking about biological evolution in addition to cultural evolution in *The Leisure Class*. If Veblen was basing his own evolutionary theory on that of Spencer then presumably Eff thinks this biological evolution was continuing into the present, although Eff is unclear on this point.

¹³ Hodgson 1992 and 1998; Tilman 1996. See also Edgell and Tilman 1989.

¹⁴ Rutherford 1984 and 1998.

Jennings and Waller dismiss claims that biological evolution played a significant role in Veblen's work either literally or figuratively. They acknowledge that Veblen called his work post-Darwinian and made various references to Darwin. However, they think 'Darwinian' was most often a "catch word for the rejection of first causes, final terms, and teleological purposes that animated pre-Darwinian studies."¹⁵ They deny that any correspondence can be drawn between Darwinian evolution and Veblen's work beyond the use of the word evolution. They point out that, apart from several passages in *The Leisure Class*, Veblen never uses "natural selection" in his work. They also see his distinctions between selection and adaptation as "vague," and think that Veblen was less interested in the process of evolution than in its results. They recognize Veblen's literal uses of biology, in instincts and race, but believe these influences were "remote" when compared with the role of culture.¹⁶

Rutherford is also skeptical about the likelihood of close analogies between Veblen's socioeconomic evolution and Darwin's biological evolution. He argues that, in fact, the evolutionary process in Veblen's writings operates in the opposite manner to the natural selection of Darwin. In

¹⁵ Jennings and Waller 1998, 191.

¹⁶ Jennings and Waller 1996, 1173, and 1995, 414.

Darwin's theory variation in organisms occurs first, followed by selection. But, according to Rutherford, "Veblen's system is not so much one of institutional variation followed by selection by the material environment as it is one of variation in the material environment itself prompting an adaptive institutional response."¹⁷ If Rutherford is correct, then Veblen's system would be more analogous to a Lamarckian evolutionary process than a Darwinian.

Rutherford's writing is important for the current work because he is one of the few scholars who has attempted to disentangle the threads of Veblen's discussion of socioeconomic evolution and demonstrate the lines of causation Veblen contemplated. Specifically he attempts to interpret what Veblen meant by "selective adaptation."

Rutherford divides the causal system at work into two processes: one of selection and one of adaptation, of which he says "Veblen often simply consolidates both of these processes within what he calls 'selective adaptation.'" The selection process amounts to "'a selection between stable types of temperament and character' that is carried out by the existing institutional environment." The adaptation process consists of "what Veblen expresses as 'adaptation

¹⁷ Rutherford 1998, 465 n.

of men's habits of thought to changing circumstances.'"¹⁸
Rutherford does allow for some of the chronological changes in Veblen's opinions by noting that in his later work Veblen's use of the selection process diminishes "very significantly," leaving the evolutionary process being one of "adaptation of habits of thought to new circumstances."¹⁹

Rutherford's analysis offers greater insight into Veblen's the evolutionary process than that achieved by most previous writers. Still, I feel his conclusions could be enhanced by the approach I am adopting here. I can make two points with one example. The first point is that Rutherford pays too little attention to how Veblen's arguments changed over time. For example, Rutherford recognizes that the instincts are a biological factor in human character. Rutherford says that "within historical time periods the instinctive endowment is to be regarded as stable," although he acknowledges that "Veblen was not entirely consistent in this," and refers for comparison to a passage in *The Leisure Class* and to one in *The Instinct of Workmanship*. My claim is that Veblen changed his mind on the role of hereditary traits in human behavior between

¹⁸ Rutherford 1998, 467.

¹⁹ Like Clarence Ayres, Rutherford believes that new circumstances are largely created by changes in technology. Rutherford thinks that technology, in its turn, is the product of idle curiosity. He contrasts this view with that of Hodgson, who believes idle curiosity, by itself, creates new habits of thought. I think Rutherford is closer to the mark, particularly for Veblen's later work.

these two books. Hence, this is not a matter of inconsistency. There has been a basic change in the theoretical relationship between biology and behavior and Veblen's work cannot be properly understood unless this is recognized.

The second point, which is closely related, is that Veblen used biological evolution literally in his early work. Human nature continued changing into the present. This clarifies some of the puzzles Rutherford encounters in his own analysis. For example, taking the evolutionary process as metaphorical makes it impossible to understand what Veblen could possibly have meant by expressions such as "a selective elimination of the unfit individual and lines of descent." Having rejected any biological interpretation, Rutherford cannot explain how "'selection' can have any effect on the balance of types within the population."²⁰ I argued earlier that if the theories of social selection advocated by the anthropo-sociologists are applied to Veblen's discussions in *The Leisure Class*, then expressions such as this refer to a literal biological selection of "types," even during the modern period.²¹

²⁰ This refers to contemporary society. Rutherford allows that in the early days a literal struggle for existence was taking place.

²¹ It is unclear from Rutherford what exactly he takes "types" to mean. He does not refer to them as racial (or ethnic). Neither does Rutherford mention "variants" nor distinguish them from types, which I think is crucial for understanding the evolutionary process in *The Leisure Class*.

Similar difficulties of interpretation have plagued other writers in trying to elucidate Veblen's evolutionary process. Geoff Hodgson and Rick Tilman have both claimed that Veblen was using a Darwinian analogy in his institutional economics and both point to seemingly conclusive statements to this effect in *The Leisure Class*. A frequently quoted passage is the first paragraph from Chapter 8, entitled "Industrial Exemption and Conservatism." This chapter begins:

The life of man in society, just like the life of other species, is a struggle for existence, and therefore it is a process of selective adaptation. The evolution of the social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions. The progress which has been and is being made in human institutions and in human character may be set down, broadly, to a process of selection of the fittest habits of thought and to a process of enforced adaptation of individuals to an environment which has progressively changed with the growth of the community and with the changing institutions under which men have lived. Institutions are not only themselves the result of a selective and adaptive process which shapes the prevailing or dominant types of spiritual attitude and aptitudes; they are at the same time special methods of life and

of human relations, and are therefore in their turn efficient factors of selection. So that the changing institutions in their turn make for a further selection of individuals endowed with the fittest temperament, and a further adaptation of individual temperament and habits to the changing environment through the formation of new institutions.²²

As Geoff Hodgson says, "there are many interesting facets of this passage."²³ Apart from Tilman's suggestion that Veblen might intend something literally biological here, the biological expressions and implications in this paragraph are usually taken metaphorically, and Darwin is usually taken as the source of this metaphor, rather than Spencer or Lamarck. The debate then centers on how far Veblen intended this metaphor to be taken. Little agreement has been reached on this matter. Armed, as we now are, with evidence that Veblen did intend evolution literally as well as metaphorically, this passage may be subjected to a more "biological" analysis. This will show that Tilman's "feeling" is correct.

From the first sentence, this paragraph is difficult to interpret as entirely metaphorical. If this sentence

²²Veblen 1975[©1899], 188. This passage is quoted in full by Edgell and Tilman 1989, Tilman 1996, Hodgson 1992, 1993; Waller and Jennings 1996.

²³Hodgson 1992, 293.

were only applied to "man in society," it could pass as a metaphor. By adding "just like the life of other species" Veblen surely nullified any suggestion that he was talking metaphorically. This phrase re-emphasizes both mankind's place in the animal kingdom, and its subjection to similar biological processes. Actually, if this were analogical, it should make sense in reverse. This would give something like "The place of animals in nature, just like the life of man in society, is a constant process of socialization into the competing norms of a changing cultural system," which would be a rather odd comparison.

However, Veblen made a crucial distinction in this sentence. It is the life of man *in society* that is a struggle for existence. So, while humanity does struggle for existence in the same way as other species, the human struggle takes place on a different plane to that of other animals.

The difference in this struggle can be shown by putting this statement together with statements from the earlier theoretical papers. As we saw, Veblen began the "The Instinct of Workmanship" and "The Beginnings of Ownership" by taking issue with the foundations of conventional economic beliefs. This remained a life long feature of his work. Most of the beliefs of the Classical and Marxist economists were based upon "the preconceptions

of Natural Rights and a coercive Order of Nature."²⁴ This implied, among other things, that competition between human beings was latent in nature, that it was inevitable. Nature had immutable laws that were coercive and as binding upon humans as they were on every other creature.

Veblen rejected this argument in its natural rights form. He argued that the supposed aversion to labor, for example, was not and could not be a natural trait of the human species. It was a cultural fact, and one that could only be countenanced by a species that had so distanced all its competitors in the struggle for material survival that it was "now able, without jeopardy to the life of the species, to play fast and loose with the spiritual basis of its survival."²⁵ Mankind could afford to behave recklessly because it had a large material margin for error. Humans could thus indulge themselves in dangerous make-believes. So, although the "struggle" in which humans engaged might still be classed as "natural," it was now taking place within a different environment to the struggle of other animals, or of mankind during the early stages of savagery. After savagery the struggle ceased to be between the species and the physical environment and increasingly took place among members of the species within an environment

²⁴Veblen 1998b[©1898], 33.

²⁵Veblen 1998e[©1898], 80.

that was, to a great extent, created by the species itself. This environment did not result from conscious planning, either of mankind or Nature or Providence. It was the non-teleological result of the evolutionary process.

Veblen denied the reality of the natural order and demonstrated that the process of biological evolution was unlikely to have made humanity a species of sportsmen. These conclusions could have opened the door for an entirely cultural explanation for human behavior; but, as yet, Veblen was unable to free himself from the nineteenth century confusion between culture and biology, and particularly the blur that surrounded Lamarckism. So, even if mankind was not subject to Natural Laws, in the Enlightenment sense, they were still subject to biological processes in the Darwinian (or Spencerian) sense.

This is shown in the next sentence from the last passage quoted: "The evolution of social structure has been a process of natural selection of institutions." This sentence appears to be an obvious metaphor. The evolution of social structure does not seem to have a biological meaning, especially as it is due to changes in institutions. Veblen defines institutions as habits of thought, and habits change in response to changes in cultural factors. To call this process "natural" selection, though, is not an obvious choice of words to describe a purely cultural process.

Taking these two opening sentences together, combined with the influence of Herbert Spencer and the earlier discussion of "The Instinct of Workmanship," a strong implication arises that Veblen is talking about a Lamarckian process. The cultural and biological interact in a mutually determining fashion through a process of cumulative causation. Veblen is taking a thoroughly Spencerian view of the evolutionary process.²⁶ If his language here is taken as figurative, then Chapters 8 and 9 of *The Leisure Class* become largely unintelligible. It can be shown that even the expression the "natural selection of institutions" was intended in a literal sense to mean the selection of people with the "fittest habits of thought."²⁷

The language used here is reminiscent of the biological evolution of Darwin and Lamarck. Indeed, the phrase "selective adaptation" and the characteristics of the process itself imply some combination of Darwinian natural selection and Lamarckian adaptation to the environment. However, as Veblen is applying this evolutionary process to "man in society," something done by

²⁶ I mean this to apply to the interaction of biology and culture, not necessarily in the exact details of the evolutionary process where Veblen placed more emphasis on Darwinian selection.

²⁷At this time Veblen typically refers to institutions as habits of thought, without indicating that they are not simply the habits of individuals but habits of thought shared by the majority of a population: i.e. institutions are a social not an individual phenomena.

neither Darwin nor Lamarck, similarities to Spencer suggest themselves, and again, these similarities are very close.

Both Darwin and Spencer used selection and adaptation in their evolutionary theories, as did most other people who wrote on social or biological issues at this time. However, they used them in different ways. For Darwin offspring varied from their parents, with the source of these variations being inexplicable. If these variations were to have any significance in the evolutionary process they had to make the organism more adaptable to the ambient environment. Nature then selected the most favorable variations, or the variations with the most "utility:" that is to say, the variations that were most adaptive. Lamarckians, such as Spencer, who took active adaptation as the important feature of evolution, could make use of natural selection "as the 'apex of the pyramid' but only after the 'origin of the fittest' had been explained in terms of adaptation."²⁸ The process Veblen describes is more akin to one of active adaptation and the inheritance of acquired traits than to selection among favorable but random variations.

A few additional points can be drawn from this passage. The first concerns the evolutionary "process," as Veblen describes it. Veblen begins with the phrase

²⁸Stocking 1968, 243.

"selective adaptation," which is one he must have appreciated as he continued to use it throughout work. In the opening sentence the struggle for existence is described as "a process of selective adaptation." However, the phrase is then split into two component parts of selection and adaptation. Veblen then describes "a process of natural selection of institutions," "a process of selection of the fittest habits of thought," and "a selection of individuals endowed with the fittest temperament." Similarly, there is an "enforced adaptation of individuals to an environment," and "adaptation of individual temperament and habits." I presume that these various adaptations and selections are part of the single process of selective adaptation, and that these various components produce the evolution of the particular cultures. Then, presumably, all of these components should fit together in some coherent fashion to explain cultural evolution.

The final observation to be made on this passage concerns cumulative causation. Like Spencer, Veblen pays close attention to the interaction of individuals and the environment. Because the significant human environment is to a large degree the social environment, every change in the individuals who make up society will necessarily change the society of which they are members. So there exists a mutual give and take between society and its members. In

this passage, institutions result from this process of selective adaptation. However, institutions also make up the social structure so that they in turn act upon the members of society--they form the environment to which individuals must adapt and the process through which the fittest habits of thought are selected. These interactions between the different components of the system often give the impression that Veblen is arguing in a circle. Everything is determined by everything else, so what is cause and what is effect will depend on which point you enter the on-going process.²⁹ In this both Veblen and Spencer have a similar evolutionary scheme in mind. Spencer attempted to elucidate the mutual interaction of the individual with the environment, the mutual interaction of cause and effect which makes evolution a process of cumulative causation. Veblen borrows and develops this process, and unless this interaction is recognized Veblen can appear to be arguing in a circle, when he is actually describing a sequence.³⁰

The discussion Veblen provides in the opening paragraph of chapter eight of *The Leisure Class* accords with a gradualist approach to cultural evolution,

²⁹Using the language of systems theory, Hodgson calls these "feed-back loops," Hodgson 1992.

³⁰On Veblen see Rutherford 1984; on Spencer see Peel 1976; on Veblen and Spencer see Eff 1989. Spencer made the famous analogy to a snowball rolling down hill, starting small, then gradually growing through the accumulation of snow.

regardless of whether this is purely cultural or partly biological. The social structure and its evolution are the outcome of adaptation and selection at the individual level. The existing structure is the complex of social institutions; each of these institutions is a consensus of habits of thought; this consensus is between individual's habits of thought. The social structure provides the prevailing "theory of life" and compels conformity to it. But if anything upsets the habitual patterns of behavior of a sufficient number of individuals, then their habits of thought change. These changes ripple through society affecting institutions and social structure. In this way the whole culture becomes gradually transformed through changes in the habits of its individual members. Some societies, such as the Tasmanian before the arrival of Europeans, may remain unchanged for long periods of time and establish an equilibrium between the individual and society, and society and the material environment. Others may undergo a continual transformation, as in modern Occidental society, where the individual was constantly adapting to a social environment that was constantly changing. Veblen expressed this process in terms borrowed from Spencer:

Social advance, especially as seen from the point of view of economic theory, consists in a continued

progressive approach to an approximately exact "adjustment of inner relations to outer relations;" but this adjustment is never definitively established, since the "outer relations" are subject to constant change as a consequence of the progressive change going on in the "inner relations."³¹

Overall Veblen's approach to the evolutionary process in *The Leisure Class* seems closer to a modified form of Spencerism than to a Darwinian process of natural selection. Nevertheless, Veblen's use of "natural selection" and his emphasis on selection as part of the process implies that part of his modifications to Spencer was to attempt a closer correspondence to Darwinism. However, the actual process of adaptation followed by selection does not correspond very closely with Darwin's process of random variation followed by selection. The closest Veblen comes to describing a Darwinian process is in "The Instinct of Workmanship" during his discussion of how peaceable traits became fixed upon the earliest humans. But even here he falls back on the inheritance of acquired traits rather than the spontaneous generation of variation. During the barbarian and pecuniary stages of culture insufficient time existed for a Darwinian process to shape

³¹ Veblen 1975[1899], 192. Spencer used this expression in both *Principles of Psychology* and *Principles of Sociology*.

human nature. The link between human nature and the prevailing cultural scheme can only make the process one of Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics.

A final problem is that this on-going evolution of human nature, whether Darwinian or Lamarckian, which Veblen presents in his theory of variants, clashes with both the assumption of the psychic unity of mankind and the persistence of ethnic types. If human nature adapts to the environment then it will deviate with the environment. Spencer recognized this difficulty and adjusted for it by using a dynamic view of psychic unity: human nature would be the same under the same circumstances of life. So, although the European and the Aborigine were not the same now, the Aborigine was the same as stone age Europeans had been, and could become, if placed in the same environment, what Europeans are now. It is likely that Veblen implicitly adopted this view along with other aspects of Spencer's system, although his belief in a "generic" human nature that persists through the different cultural stages seems to run contrary to Spencer's vision. Unfortunately, Veblen did not address this question directly so this remains a conjecture.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE LEISURE CLASS.

To War and Revolution

Veblen intended his second book to be called *The Instinct of Workmanship*, and wrote to Sarah Hardy in 1900 saying, "I have no doubt such a volume on the Instinct will be written before long."¹ The book was not published until fourteen years later. No doubt the book as it finally appeared was very different from what it would have been if published in the early nineteen hundreds. Still, even in its published form, the book continues the themes Veblen developed in the late 1890s and seems an obvious sequel to *The Leisure Class* in Veblen's canon of work. More than any of Veblen's other books, *The Instinct of Workmanship* draws upon the same methodological approaches as *The Leisure Class*: the comparative method, biological facets of human nature, cultural and physical anthropology.

There is no record of why this book took so long to materialize, except the claim by Veblen, resorting to animistic beliefs for once, that the project had a curse upon it, so that every time he tried to work on it some major distraction occurred in his life that prevented the

¹ Dorfman 1966, 197.

writing from going forward.² Although Veblen did not intend this as a serious excuse, it is a strange one to offer because after *The Leisure Class* he continued the very productive period of his life that began with "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" He wrote a draft of what became *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*.³ He was dissatisfied with this and set it aside. He did publish his second book *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, and published a string of articles.⁴ Certainly, *The Instinct of Workmanship* did not fail to appear because Veblen was unable to write.

In the absence of clear evidence any suggestion as to why Veblen struggled for so long to produce *The Instinct of Workmanship* can only be conjectural. So, making due allowance for this, I suggest that a major part of the reason was Veblen's inability to disentangle biological from cultural factors in the evolutionary processes. Among other things, *The Instinct of Workmanship* is an extensive

² In 1910 Veblen wrote to Wesley Mitchell over the delay: "The explanation of all that is very simple. You may remember my expressing a hope that I might write something about the Instinct. I arranged to go to work, and directly, just as has happened before, the hoodoo which rests on that topic became operative. Domestic circumstances, interesting enough in their own way but unprofitable, are all there is time for." Quoted in Dorfman 1973, 98.

³ Veblen had considered as a subtitle, *An Exercise in Total Depravity*.

⁴ Veblen published twenty-two articles and some two dozen book reviews between *The Leisure Class* and *The Instinct of Workmanship*.

discussion of the same relationships between biological and cultural causes of human behavior that Veblen tried unsuccessfully to distinguish in Chapters 8 and 9 of *The Leisure Class*. Without establishing some means of disentangling these differing influences, a book such as *The Instinct of Workmanship* would be impossible to write.

Some indirect evidence of Veblen's inability to articulate the evolutionary process can be recognized in the content of his writings over this period. Commencing with "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?" Veblen wrote the series of three evolutionary and anthropological papers followed by *The Leisure Class*. Next, he planned to write *The Instinct of Workmanship*, which would have been a logical extension of the thrust of his work at this time. Instead, he set off in a new direction.

Between 1900 and 1913 little of Veblen's published writing directly followed his earlier interests. His main concerns during this period became critiques of economic theory, and the analysis of contemporary business practices.⁵ Compared with *The Leisure Class* his focus was narrower, drawing little on anthropology, and shorter, as he did not take the broad historical sweep of his earlier

⁵ The entire list is too long to cite but some examples are "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," "Gustav Schmoller's Economics," "Pecuniary and Industrial Employments," *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. These and many more are reprinted in Veblen 1990 and 1998.

work. He does refer to evolution and Darwinism in many places. However, these comments were brief and do not constitute the main thrust of the discussions in which they are included. Rather, they constitute a background against which other theoretical schemes are judged. Nevertheless, taken together, Veblen's brief discussions of the evolutionary process show a deepening of his evolutionary perspective as a method, rather than in any applied manner.⁶

There are some exceptions to this narrower focus. "An Early Experiment in Trusts" concerns the growth of piracy as a business among the Vikings of the ninth century, being therefore "historical." The comparison between the marauding activities of the Norsemen and the behavior of trusts in twentieth century America obviously has a humorous tone, although Veblen saw a serious similarity between these two forms of business enterprise. This similarity clearly continues the comparison Veblen made between the predatory animus that drove barbarian and businessman alike. However, his article on the Vikings presented an isolated example, not a point of departure for an extensive discussion.

Veblen presents a more substantial continuation of earlier themes in his two essays on the growth of science:

⁶ See, for example, his comparison of Marxism and Darwinism in "The Socialist Economics of Karl Marx," I and II, reprinted in Veblen 1990g[©1906 and ©1907].

"The Place of Science in Modern Civilization," published in 1906, and "The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View," published in 1908. The latter essay traces the growth of knowledge from an animistic imputation of purpose to events to material explanations running in terms of opaque cause and effect.⁷ Veblen again takes a long and broad view. He begins from the presumed savage state and employs the comparative method, using contemporary anthropology to fill in the historical past.

In "The Place of Science" Veblen made a major addition to his instinct theory by introducing idle curiosity. In fact, this is the only occasion during the first decade of the twentieth century that he elaborated on his conceptions of human nature to any extent. Veblen distinguished idle curiosity, as a disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, from a pragmatic appreciation of knowledge for its utility in achieving some specific end. This served to close a gap in Veblen's causal explanation for socio-cultural evolution. Veblen had not been particularly clear on the sources of evolutionary change in *The Leisure Class*. Most of the components of the evolutionary process, such as racial types, variants, and institutions, were conservative

⁷ Veblen's depiction of the long, historic movement from animism to material cause and effect resembles his discussion of the same transformation taking place in economic science over a much shorter period of time in "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," Veblen 1990f[©1899 and ©1900].

rather than progressive--that is, they worked to maintain the current stasis. He had suggested, rather vaguely, that the process was one of constant adjustment and readjustment through cumulative change, and also that the change might be initiated through changes in technology. However, he had no explanation for what might cause technology to change. This disinterested inquiry into the way things work provided some motivation for discovery. The use that was made of the knowledge developed by idle curiosity could be turned to pragmatic ends, either constructively by the instinct of workmanship or destructively through the predatory bent. Nevertheless, the natural inquisitiveness associated with idle curiosity could provide a source of ongoing disturbance in the social system.⁸

Unfortunately, in solving one problem Veblen created another. He had earlier attacked the economic man of classical economics as a freak of nature because any species that survived the process of biological evolution would have to possess a drive towards securing its means of livelihood. Human beings, he argued, were active and they were, in their own apprehension, the center of a teleological process; they acted purposefully to achieve some end in view. The lines of activity that would be selected for survival by aimless natural forces, in the

⁸ It seems that by the time "The Place of Science" appeared in print in 1906 Veblen had already begun to treat human nature as fixed.

Darwinian conception of the process, would necessarily be those that were useful for survival. Hence, human instincts would tend to be pragmatic. But idle curiosity, as Veblen defined it, had no pragmatic purpose. Thus, Veblen resorted to explaining idle curiosity as a "subsidiary phenomena;" an accidental by-product of the other, pragmatic psychological processes. Idle curiosity had survived the selection process not so much through being an aid to the species, but by not being a hindrance in the struggle for existence.⁹

Apart from idle curiosity Veblen added little to his biological theory and occupied himself with different theoretical concerns until his evolutionary theory received a fresh impetus from the Mendelian mutation theory articulated by Hugo De Vries.

Mutation theory seemed to offer an alternative to Darwinian explanations for biological evolution. To bring about new varieties and species, Charles Darwin had relied on the gradual accumulation of slight variations over vast periods of time, and had always been suspicious of any proposals for sudden large changes in species; *natura non facit saltum* was his motto. The rediscovery of Johann Mendel's experiments with peas suggested that evolution might proceed through these sudden leaps that Darwin had so

⁹ Veblen 1990e[©1906], 6-7.

distrusted. Veblen took this new theory and put it to work in his own evolutionary theory.¹⁰

Veblen published two papers in 1913 that applied mutation theory to the population of Europe. In the first, "The Mutation Theory and the Blond Race," Veblen rejected gradualist theories of biological evolution on the grounds that any slight variations arising in a population would quickly be swamped in offspring when the solitary variation bred with the rest of the population.¹¹ Consequently, new races could not appear through the gradual accretion of minor variations. It followed that they could only appear from existing races by mutation. Veblen then applied this logic to the population of Europe.

Veblen retained the belief that the European population was an amalgam of three races.¹² He supported a common belief that the Mediterranean race had entered Europe from Africa. Veblen argued that this had occurred sometime before the last Ice Age. When the ice advanced once more over the European continent the Mediterranean

¹⁰ Veblen's exact position on biological topics between 1899 and 1913 is uncertain; he neglects them in his writings. One point that is striking, however, is that Veblen writes more critically of Herbert Spencer and Spencer's Lamarckian evolution completely disappears from Veblen's work.

¹¹ Fleeming Jenkins had first pointed out this difficulty in 1867. Jenkins argued that a variation, no matter how favorable, would be like a drop of black paint in a bucket of white paint; as soon as it was mixed the black would disappear. See Mayr 1982, 512-4.

¹² Veblen used "racial types" at this time instead of "ethnic types."

race had been driven back towards the Mediterranean seaboard. Being African in origin, the cold was disruptive to the race's biological constitution and it was thrown into a mutating state. The dolicho-blond had then appeared as a mutant of the Mediterranean.¹³

Veblen further suggested that a new mutant race was best adapted to the environment in which it first appeared. While the Mediterranean stayed close to the warmer southern shores as the ice receded, the blond followed it northwards finally making its permanent home in the Baltic littoral. This climate best suited its native temperament and blond lines of descent were unable to survive for many generations in hotter climates. The round-headed Alpine had entered Europe from Asia and settled the central regions of Europe between the blond and Mediterranean, interbreeding with both of them.

In the second paper, "The Blond Race and the Aryan Culture," Veblen contended, against contemporary beliefs, that the Alpine, not the blond, was the true Aryan. Before the Alpine race had entered Europe, it had already established a predatory barbarian culture based on nomadic herding on the great plains of Central Asia. As European topography was less suitable for the nomadic life-style,

¹³ It had long been suggested, based on head shape, that the brunet Mediterranean and the dolicho-blond were branches of the same original race. For example, see Ripley 1899 and Keane 1896.

except for some stretches of the Danube Valley, the Alpine had gradually become settled and taken up agriculture. Veblen conjectured that the Aryan language had originally spread to the Mediterranean and blond races through trade, and it had developed as a trade language in much the same way as the modern examples of "Chinook jargon, Pidgin English and Beach la Mar."¹⁴

Veblen now assumed that the human nature of the European population had been fixed since the distant past and that it was fixed along racial lines. Notions of "variants" adapting to the changing cultural environment through either a Lamarckian or Darwinian process of selective adaptation had been dropped for a more consistent racial theory. However, the theory, as Veblen presented it, ran counter to accepted beliefs about the races. In *The Leisure Class*, Veblen had advanced the standard view that the dolicho-blond was the most pugnacious of the European races. Now, he endued the Alpine with this distinction. The Alpine supposedly had appeared as a predatory mutant of an older Asian race and was now fixed in its predatory temperament. The blond, on the other hand, had appeared as a mutant when the Mediterranean was still at the savage cultural level. As racial temperament was most suitable for the environment in which the race had first appeared as a

¹⁴ Veblen 1990a[©1913], 494. This theory put Veblen "at no little variance with the philologists," Dorfman 1966, 297.

mutant the blond was not only acclimated a cooler coastal climate, it was also most acclimated to a savage culture.

Although this theory of human nature was convoluted, it was much simpler than the story Veblen had tried to develop in *The Leisure Class* and it had one definite asset: while some biologically based human nature might still affect behavior, it could now be treated as stable, fixed in prehistory. Hence, any change in the socioeconomic environment since then was due to a change in culture.

Mutation theory had thus removed one of the major complications in Veblen's system. With the instinctive component of human nature fixed, variations in the institutional structure became the only thing that could change. In 1914, the year after these two articles had been published, *The Instinct of Workmanship* and *The State of the Industrial Arts* finally appeared in print.¹⁵

In many ways *The Instinct of Workmanship* represented the culmination of the theoretical edifice Veblen had been constructing since the mid-1890s. Mutation theory gave him

¹⁵ I am not suggesting that Veblen sat down in 1913 after the publication of his two mutation articles and wrote out *The Instinct of Workmanship*. Veblen had developed much of the content of *The Instinct* in his lecture course "Economic Factors in Civilization," which he first offered in 1899. On this see Dorfman 1966, 155; Lubin 1968, 131. He had also been toying with the book for a long time. According to Dorfman, he started work on the book in 1909. Further, versions of the two mutation articles had first been written in 1909 as part of a proposal for a research grant. See Dorfman 1966, 295; and Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1999, 134. I am less concerned with the exact timing of the writings than with the adoption of a creditable biological theory that allowed Veblen to treat human nature as a constant in the midst of changing institutions.

a legitimate scientific foundation for holding human nature constant. This did not necessarily diminish the importance of biological factors in human behavior. Even if human nature had stopped evolving in the Stone Age it still determined the temperament of the generic human being that the changing cultural environment had to accommodate. However, with human nature held constant, Veblen could trace the evolution of institutions in terms of cultural change alone. Hence different patterns of behavior in different times and places could only be attributed to different institutional environments. In this respect Veblen's thought had moved in line with the changes in cultural anthropology inaugurated by Franz Boas and his followers. In other respects, Veblen's approach looks dated.

Veblen retained in *The Instinct of Workmanship* most of the components he had attempted to integrate into a theoretical whole in *The Leisure Class*. He still employed biological sources of behavior with racial anthropology and instinct theory; he still used the cultural stages and the comparative method; he still talked, overall, in evolutionary terms similar to those of Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan. Under Boas' assault the evolutionary approach to ethnology had collapsed along with the legitimacy of the comparative method. The psychic unity of mankind could be retained, but now it had little function

because human behavior was increasingly interpreted in terms of the specific historical and environmental context of particular societies. Each context was treated as unique and any recourse to linear evolutionary stages was tabooed.

Similarly, the scientific standing of instinct theory was quickly eroding. Its dubious status was evident from the start of *The Instinct of Workmanship*. The opening paragraph of the book was a strong assertion of the importance of instincts in human life. However, immediately Veblen spends two paragraphs defending the continued use of instinct for the purposes of social science when it was being rejected in biology and increasingly questioned in psychology. Veblen labored on with instincts. He distinguished them from tropisms and expounded on their continued usefulness for the less precise purposes of the social sciences, as embodying the motive force for human action.

Curiously, holding human nature constant created as many problems as it solved for Veblen. The constant human nature was the peaceable nature of the savage era of human existence. In *The Leisure Class* Veblen had faced the difficulty of trying to explain how these peaceable traits had persisted through the predatory period while human nature itself was possibly evolving. Now he had to explain how human beings, who were assumed to be peaceable and workmanlike by nature, could have created a barbarian

regime in the first place and maintained it for such a long period of time when it went against their instinctive drives.

Veblen's attempts to explain this incongruence led him into explanations that seem more tortuous than those in *The Leisure Class* for the simple reason that they are more clearly articulated. Veblen claimed that the instinctive drives became "contaminated" even to the extent that the activities provoked by a contaminated instinct could become the opposite of those towards which the uncontaminated instinct would direct behavior. In addition, the habitual patterns of behavior standardized in institutions could cumulatively pervert human behavior away from the aims of the instinctive dispositions and lead a society into imbecile usages that were detrimental to human life. The only corrective for such habituated degeneration was appeal to the native commonsense of the instincts of serviceability. Unfortunately, habitual patterns of thought so clouded the natural human urges that appeals to commonsense were frequently precluded.

The Instinct of Workmanship contains much of Veblen's most lucid analysis of the history of western civilization in terms of institutional evolution. The book was said to be Veblen's personal favorite, and he said long after he had finished writing it that it was the only book he had

written that had any long term value.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the worst sections of the book are those devoted to instinct theory and Veblen's convoluted attempts to reconcile these native human traits with actual human behavior. In many respects, Veblen's discussions of western civilization in *The Instinct of Workmanship* represent the kind of cultural anthropology being developed by Franz Boas and his followers. However, unlike Boas, Veblen could not break so easily with his roots in nineteenth century ethnology. Veblen was not content to explain culture in terms of itself. He still sought some biological factor at work in human behavior that would avoid "assuming a sheer break between the physical and immaterial phenomena of life."¹⁷

Veblen started his next book, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*, in response to the increasing tensions in Europe and hurriedly rushed it into print when war finally broke out. Whether due to the increasing antipathy towards instinct theory in the scientific community, or through his own retreat from the concept Veblen did not use the word "instinct" in this book and referred to the innate human drives with the synonym he commonly employed, "propensities." If writing *The Instinct of Workmanship* undermined Veblen's belief in instincts,

¹⁶ Dorfman 1966, 324.

¹⁷ Veblen 1964b[©1914], 13.

Imperial Germany had the same effect on his faith in race as a fruitful variable for social analysis.

Imperial Germany is largely a comparison of the national character of the Germans and the English. Veblen began the book with a discussion of the racial composition of Europe and its origins. This was elaborated along the lines of the earlier mutation articles in the first of several extensive "Supplementary Notes" at the end of the book.

Veblen asserted that "race" was a biological category that had misleadingly been applied to nation, language, and culture, and that in terms of biology the English, Germans, and the inhabitants of the rest of Northern Europe were all of the same race--or, rather, the same hybrid mixture of races. However, despite their racial identity--meaning their identical human nature--the English and Germans had developed very different national characters. As the biological component of human personality was unchanging the differences in national character could not be attributed to the different "genius" of each nation. The differences could only be attributed to the different historical developments of the two nations in shaping the institutional structure of the two countries. The internal conditions in England had been relatively peaceful for a long period of time, largely thanks to England's fortuitous geographical separation from Continental Europe. This meant

that the nation had conducted most of its militaristic exploits "overseas." This had isolated the militarism from the common run of the population who had also a peaceable environment to pursue industrial and pecuniary pursuits. This had eroded the "dead hand" of feudal barbarism on the English peoples and allowed the development of a peaceable, industrial society.

Germany, on the other hand, had been unified under the hegemony of Prussia where the prevailing animus remained barbarian. Under Prussian leadership, Germany represented a dynastic state whose only purpose was to exploit the entire resources of the nation for the greater glory of the state. In this pursuit unified Germany found itself in a unique position. Germany had a subservient population, one habituated to viewing the world in terms of finely graded distinctions of rank and to fawning before the will of the state. To this was rapidly added the industrial technology developed in England over the previous three centuries. In England, this technology had developed along with an entire institutional structure that informed the views of the English on the appropriate methods of organization and employment of this technology and the 'natural' distributions of its benefits, and so forth. Germany received this technology "clean," as it were. To the English, the institutional structure that had developed in tandem with this technology appeared as right and good

through continual habituation to these arrangements. In fact, the technology and its accompanying institutions formed a seamless whole as correct in its organization as any natural phenomenon. To the Germans, the English structure of institutions was simply an irrelevance. Germany had coupled the most advanced industrial technology to the institutional structure of the feudalistic, dynastic state. Germany now had a twentieth century technology coupled with a sixteenth century mentality; a modern productive capacity to fuel the aggrandizing aspirations of the state. As Veblen phrased it elsewhere, Germany was now as dangerous as "a drunken barbarian with a machine gun."

Some writers have suggested that Veblen's extensive discussions of biology at this time were intended to undermine biologically based explanations for behavior in general, and racial explanations in particular. The result of this attack on biology being the establishment of culture as the salient cause for different behavior patterns.¹⁸ There is some credibility to this view. Certainly, Veblen takes issue with many of the existing uses of the word race and the mythical doctrines associated with it, such as the existence of any "pure" race, Aryan or otherwise, in modern Europe. In addition, biological factors largely disappeared from Veblen's work after the

¹⁸ For example, Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1999, 134, and Jennings and Waller 1998.

war, which might indicate that their earlier treatment was merely to show their irrelevance.

These claims accord with the direction of Veblen's work during this time, although they do not fully fit with the details of this work. It is difficult to explain "Mutation Theory and the Blond Race" and *The Instinct of Workmanship* as attacks on the use of biology in social analysis. On the contrary, both of these works argue in favor of including biological factors. "Mutation Theory and the Blond Race," for example, does not so much attack racial theory as offer an alternative theory of the origins of the racial groups that constitute the European population. *The Instinct of Workmanship*, *Imperial Germany*, and *The Nature of the Peace* all restate the racial arguments present in the earlier article and although biological discussions are scant in Veblen's final works the few sentences he does write indicate he retained the same basic beliefs.¹⁹ Further, *Imperial Germany* could not be an attack on beliefs that different behavior among the English and the Germans could be attributed to differences in race. It was believed, perhaps to the extent of myth, that the English and the Germans were of the same race. Nothing in *Imperial Germany* undermines this belief. In fact, on the same grounds as the earlier mutation articles,

¹⁹ For example, Veblen 1964a[[©1923]], 41.

Veblen reaffirms this connection. The book does undermine theories of race but from the opposite direction; it undermines race as a determinant of behavior. Here are two nations whose peoples have the same biological composition and yet behave differently. These differences in behavior, therefore, must have causes other than biology. They must be institutional.

World events at this time refocused the questions Veblen had been asking and led him toward different conclusions. Although the vast majority of his work was concerned with the peoples of occidental culture, *Imperial Germany* was the first time Veblen examined the European population in terms of national characteristics instead of broader racial characteristics. This closer scrutiny of the behavior of different nations within the same racial group brought out distinctions that had been buried beneath the broader sweep of the earlier mutation articles and *The Instinct of Workmanship*. Veblen also noted the similarities in the institutional structures of different races in addition to noting the institutional distinctions between different national groups within the same race. Like the Germans, the Japanese had rapidly assimilated the modern Western technology into a feudal institutional structure. While the English and Germans were an example of people of the same race behaving differently, Japan and Germany

provided an example of two different races behaving similarly for institutional reasons.²⁰

Veblen had encountered problems in elucidating the evolutionary process in his earlier work because he was unable to disentangle the biological and cultural components of behavior. In his later work, Veblen held human nature constant, and tried to explain socioeconomic evolution in terms of technological and institutional changes taking place against this background of a constant human nature. However, the logic of Veblen's own analysis undermined the relevance of a fixed human nature for social analysis. *The Instinct of Workmanship* showed how cultural factors could completely overwhelm the fundamental instinctive drives of humanity, while *Imperial Germany* showed that race really counted for little when compared with the weight of cumulative institutional developments. In other words, culture completely dominated biology.

Imperial German includes Veblen's last extensive discussion of biological topics. In *The Nature of the Peace*, he briefly reiterates the discussion of the racial composition of Europe and its fixity according to mutation theory. He also claims that patriotism appeared to be a component of human nature made up from a complex of

²⁰ See "The Opportunity of Japan," initially published in *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. VI, July 1915, 23-38. Reprinted in Veblen 1998g, 248-66.

propensities that were (presumably) hereditary. Notably, he once again refrained from using "instinct," and employed "propensity" as a synonym.²¹

The one work that runs contrary to the general trend in Veblen's writings is *The Higher Learning in America*, published in 1918. This book followed *Imperial Germany* and *The Nature of the Peace* but once again Veblen makes extensive use of "instincts" to explain behavior. He referred specifically to the instinct of workmanship, the parental bent, and idle curiosity. This explicit return to the use of "instinct" suggests that Veblen was not tacitly retreating from the topic of instinct theory after *The Instinct of Workmanship*, as I have suggested.

However, the history of this book is rather convoluted and makes it difficult to say exactly when any part of the manuscript was written. Veblen wrote a "Preface" to the book in March 1916 in which he said that the original manuscript was written "a dozen years ago," but had not been published for various personal reasons. It seems here that he was referring to his problems at Chicago and Stanford. Veblen claimed that the issues raised in the original manuscript had changed little in the intervening period, but that he had added a section to take account of

²¹ The "patriotic animus" is, "in its elements, an hereditary trait, of the nature of an inborn native propensity," Veblen 1998f[©1917], 41.

the impact of the war on the higher learning. It is possible that Veblen had made other alterations to the manuscript. His use of idle curiosity and the parental bent suggest as much. Idle curiosity first appears in Veblen's published work in 1906 and the parental bent in 1914. Of course, Veblen might have developed the concepts by 1902; although given the importance Veblen attached to them in *The Instinct of Workmanship*, it seems unlikely that he would not have introduced them into his work at an earlier date. Dorfman suggested that Veblen might have been reworking *The Higher Learning* for publication about the time he resigned from Stanford. This could account for the inclusion of the same instincts Veblen employed in *The Instinct of Workmanship*, which he was also working on at that time.²² It also coincides with one of the personal difficulties Veblen referred to in the "Preface." Whatever the timing of any such changes it is apparent that *The Higher Learning* appears "out of order" in Veblen's canon or work, and his use of instincts was somewhat anachronistic.

Final Years.

If allowance is made for *The Higher Learning in America* then Veblen's writings about biological topics follow a clear pattern over the 1913-17 period; a sudden

²² Dorfman 1966, 295.

flurry of discussion of the biological grounding of human nature, followed by an equally sudden neglect of the topic. In fact, Veblen's work underwent a notable change from around 1917 both in its tone and in the approach to its subject matter; and even, to some extent, in the subject matter itself. This change has been remarked upon by many Veblen scholars and various explanations have been put forward.

The most obvious explanation and probably the most important was the impact of world events. Even Veblen could not quite maintain his "Olympian detachment" when faced with earthly commotions of such magnitude.²³ *Imperial Germany* was certainly begun in response to contemporary events in Europe, although Veblen commenced the book with his usual scholarly tone, including discussions of racial theory and the life of the Baltic peoples in the Stone Age. He hurried to finish it as the war he had long anticipated actually broke out. Veblen then became more directly involved with current events when he worked for the Food Administration and then as editor of *The Dial*. In his articles for *The Dial*, Veblen commented extensively on the war and on the Bolshevik revolution that the war had

²³ This must be taken in a relative sense. Veblen's contributions to *The Dial* and *Freeman* were more journalistic than his previous academic writings although many editors and readers found them excessively abstract in content and ponderous in presentation. See Dorfman 1966, Chapter XXI.

provoked. Certainly Veblen chose this direction in the face of events and this by itself turned his writing along particular lines, lines that offered little scope for the psychological and biological speculations of his previous work. On this point, Rick Tilman has said of Veblen, "a large part of his writing after 1914 tended to be of a polemical or propagandistic nature in which the subtleties of recent psychological theory would have been submerged anyway." Allan Gruchy claims, however, that the decline in this aspect of Veblen's work was due to Veblen's inability "to keep up with trends in the development of sociopsychological analysis after 1914." In this context, both Gruchy and Tilman mention only Veblen's instinct psychology, neither of them discuss his uses of race.²⁴

Enervation of Veblen's System.

Veblen was not surprised when war finally came to Europe; he had been expecting as much since 1911. Nevertheless, the war and the circumstances that lead up to it were a challenge to Veblen's vision of human nature and socioeconomic evolution. Although he was too keen a student of history to share the naïve optimism of Herbert Spencer, Veblen did show himself to be cautiously sanguine during

²⁴ Tilman 1992, 156; Gruchy 1947, 128-9. Seckler [1973, 32] claims that Veblen's work as a whole suffered from his increased involvement in "questions of the hour."

the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. His hope for the future lay in those irreducible traits of human nature, which were those of the peaceable savage, combined with the mechanical discipline of modern industrial technology. This technology could satisfy the natural human desire to be serviceable to the community, while at the same time habituating people to a materialistic rather than an animistic conception of existence.

The more technologically advanced nations, particularly those of the English speaking countries, appeared to be returning humanity to a less belligerent period of human history after the long predatory interlude of barbarism. That was not to suggest that the millennium was imminent. However, the quasi-peaceable era that followed the demise of feudalism and the events of more recent history--that period Veblen had once called "civilized," then later "modern"--suggested that the system of industry and the accompanying growth of science were working to dispel the older barbarian "theory of life," that attributed social and physical reality to the irresistible application of personal force, and to replace them with a more materialistic appreciation of events in terms of opaque cause and effect. The scope for individual assertion and the incitement of invidious merit still held its place, although now this more frequently occurred

through the clink of cash in the market place than through the clash of steel on the battlefield.

Armed with mutation theory Veblen could separate biological and cultural evolution and finally pen the long anticipated *Instinct of Workmanship* as his first major exposition of evolutionary theory since *The Leisure Class*. Ironically, Veblen wrote of the peaceable traits of generic human nature just as the world prepared itself for the most enormous blood bath so far in its history. Thus events worked to show that even if humans were peaceable by nature, nature counted for little compared with the drift of institutional growth. Shortly before war commenced Veblen acknowledged this possibility in one of his most famous quotes. He said,

history records more frequent and more spectacular instances of the triumph of imbecile institutions over life and culture than of peoples who have by force of instinctive insight saved themselves alive out of a desperately precarious institutional situation, such, for instance, as now faces the peoples of Christendom.²⁵

In *The Instinct of Workmanship* and then *Imperial Germany* Veblen's own analysis showed that instinct and race

²⁵ Veblen 1964b[©1914], 25.

offered little insight into the causes of the bellicose clamor in Europe.

Despite its many merits, Veblen had waited too long to write *The Instinct of Workmanship*. Developments within the field of intellectual inquiry were moving against some of the major premises on which Veblen based his theoretical system. In 1898, he had proclaimed in "Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science?", that economics needed to be brought into line with the evolutionary concepts of modern science. By the time *The Instinct of Workmanship* appeared only sixteen years later many of the concepts Veblen had integrated into his theory looked decidedly old-fashioned. The validity of instinct theory was being so seriously challenged that Veblen was forced to start the book by defending his use of the concept. He dropped the word altogether from his subsequent work, with the previously noted exception of *The Higher Learning in America*. In the 1920s Veblen even went so far as to deny that he had believed in instinct theory. Clarence Ayres tells an often-repeated story of meeting Veblen. Ayres recalled that

Veblen asked me if I had ever noticed his definition of 'instinct' and when I replied with a grin that I never had, he matched my grin and remarked that no

such definition appeared because if you define
instinct exactly 'there ain't no such animal.'²⁶

Although this denial indicates that Veblen no longer had faith in the concept, it conflicts too much with the evidence to accept that Veblen had never used an instinct psychology. Perhaps what he had meant by "instinct" had ceased to be an acceptable use of the term, but Veblen had employed the word extensively in the sense of an innate "propensity," or as he had explained it to Max Handman, "I mean by instinct a direction--*anlage*."²⁷ As to his not defining the term exactly, Veblen might have made the same remark about any of his other concepts. His definition of instinct as "innate and persistent propensities of human nature" seems as exact, for example, as his definition of institutions as "habits of thought," or technology as "ways and means."²⁸

In addition to instincts, the credibility of evolutionary stages and the comparative method had also come under devastating attacks in cultural anthropology, particularly from Franz Boas and his followers. Veblen still employed this approach in *The Instinct of*

²⁶ Quoted in Dorfman 1973, 104 n.

²⁷ Quoted in Dorfman 1973, 104 n.

²⁸ Veblen 1964b[©1914], 2.

Workmanship, but this was the last time it made an appearance in his work. Veblen's later works adhered more closely to the environmental and historical criteria advocated by the Boasian school and Veblen concentrated almost exclusively on the nations of the North Atlantic who shared a common history and culture.

Two further points might be mentioned here. First, the "vogue" of Herbert Spencer, as Richard Hofstadter has called it, ended abruptly at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁹ Veblen did retain some of the earlier Spencerian influences, particularly the evolution of institutions, and dropped other, notably Spencer's Lamarckism. After *The Leisure Class*, Veblen developed his theories independently of any further Spencerian influence.

Second, the mutation theory advocated by Hugo De Vries was viewed, at this time, as an alternative to the Darwinian theory of gradual biological change through the accumulation of minor favorable variations. Veblen's acceptance of mutation theory substantially changed the role of biological evolution in his work. This rejection of Lamarckism and Darwinism in favor of mutation theory precluded the use of gradual and on-going biological change in Veblen's theory. This had the advantage of leaving human nature fixed. But it requires a careful interpretation of

²⁹ Hofstadter 1955, Chapter 2.

Veblen's terms in his early and later writing. In *The Leisure Class*, Veblen speaks of the "natural selection of institutions" and "selective adaptation" with a literal biological meaning. After *The Leisure Class*, Veblen dropped ongoing biological evolution from the discussion. Consequently he never again refers to the possibility of institutions evolving through a process of natural selection. Ann Jennings and Bill Waller have pointed to this fact as evidence against Geoff Hodgson's claim that Veblen used Darwinism as an analogy for socioeconomic evolution. However, as both parties in this debate treat these terms as entirely metaphorical, neither provides any explanation for this change in Veblen's use of terms.³⁰

Similarly, Malcolm Rutherford notes that Veblen's use of "selective adaptation" as the evolutionary process changed over time. In particular, in his later work Veblen relies on adaptation much more and hardly appeals to selection. This decline in "selection" would seem to supports the position of Jennings and Waller against that of Hodgson. Rutherford is correct in his observation, but once again the reasons for this change are not recognized because Rutherford treats these terms metaphorically. Veblen not only changes the emphasis between these two components of socioeconomic evolution but he also changes

³⁰ Jennings and Waller 1996; Hodgson 1998.

their meaning. With ongoing biological change in *The Leisure Class*, "selection" could act in a literal Darwinian sense to pick the "fittest habits of thought" and eliminate "defective lines of descent." Adaptation, on the other hand, worked in Spencer's sense of the biological adaptation of individuals to the prevailing social *milieu*. As has been noted, Veblen's earlier work was confused on this point as he equivocated over the biological and cultural aspects of this process. After *The Leisure Class*, institutional change became entirely cultural and mostly driven by technological change. Hence technology changed the existing methods of doing things and provoked an adjustment, or adaptation, in the existing habits of thought. Consequently, the adaptation in Veblen's later presentation of evolution did not include any of the earlier biological adaptation.

The shift in emphasis in Veblen's writings from about 1917 was largely due to the importance of current events and Veblen's desire to comment upon them. By itself, this moved Veblen away from the aloof theory building of the pre-war period towards a more overtly political assessment of pecuniary operations. However, developments in those areas of inquiry on which Veblen had drawn for his own theory were also at work and they largely undermined the foundations of Veblen's theory. Events had lead Veblen away

from the broader theoretical problems with which he had been grappling and he never really returned to them. *The Instinct of Workmanship* represented the expression of twenty years of theory building, but many of its premises had become outmoded. Without recourse to instinct theory, the comparative method, and the cultural stages of evolution it would be difficult to say exactly what remained of Veblen's original conception of evolutionary theory.

With hindsight that question is fairly easily answered. While many of the concepts in Veblen's approach to economic matters looked like survivals from the previous century, much of value yet remained. It was possible to develop his approach along lines consonant with developments in psychology and cultural anthropology, as was done by Clarence Ayres and other neo-institutionalists. Unfortunately, what proved to be useful in Veblen's work for future generations has obscured the approach Veblen himself was taking. With the publication of *Absentee Ownership in Modern Times* in 1923 Veblen ended the polemical work provoked by the war. At that time he was 65 years old. Whether Veblen would have rehabilitated his work along the same lines as Clarence Ayres is open to question. However, he did not do so, and it seems likely that he could not have done so, by his own admission.

Veblen submitted an article in 1925 to the *American Economic Review* entitled "Economic Theory in the Calculable Future." The article is revealing of Veblen's opinions on intellectual pursuits and his own place in the development of economic theory. One of Veblen's valuable contributions to the sociology of knowledge was recognizing how the metaphysical preconceptions of science changed with the changing cultural circumstances. Veblen argued this point not just for social science but also for the physical and biological sciences.³¹ Hence, what passed as a legitimate view of reality changed with changing circumstances, only with something of a lag.

Veblen declared that the incoming generation of economists would necessarily construct different theories of the world to their predecessors as their habits of thought were shaped by the events of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Similarly, the outgoing generation, which including Veblen, had had their views shaped by the points of view that prevailed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Veblen offered this opinion as a generalization, but it clearly applies to his own work. My argument from the beginning has been that Veblen's theory was more 'old-

³¹ Veblen offers countless observations on this point but see particularly "The Preconceptions of Economic Science" and "The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View," both reprinted in Veblen 1990.

fashioned' than has been commonly recognized and that much of it rested on theoretical constructs carried over from the point of view of the cultural and biological evolutionists of the second half of the nineteenth century and that had become moribund within Veblen's lifetime. In this essay Veblen acknowledges as much. Perhaps the only satisfaction Veblen could retrieve from this admission was the knowledge that his own preconceptions were a century ahead of the natural rights precepts of contemporary neoclassical economists.

Veblen's Last Word.

By the 1920s, the social sciences were moving away from the biological explanations for human behavior that had been so pervasive twenty years earlier. From certain perspectives Veblen can be viewed as a spearhead in this movement towards historical and cultural explanations for behavior. Biology plays an insignificant role in his writing after 1917. It might even be alleged that Veblen's intent in *The Instinct of Workmanship* and *Imperial Germany* was to diminish the significance of biology for the social sciences.³² This, however, is mistaken. Veblen certainly doubted the scientific validity of much of the contemporary racial theory, but even in the 1920s he retained the belief

³² This has been suggested in a recent evaluation of Veblen's use of race. See Jennings and Waller 1998.

that biology contributed to behavior. For example, in *Absentee Ownership* he reminded his readers that,

it is well to recall that in point of native bent and capacities European mankind is still the same as the neolithic European population once was some ten or twelve thousand years ago. The hybrid mixture of races that occupies the countries of Europe and its colonies is still the same as the European population was in prehistoric (post-glacial) times, so far as regards all hereditary traits, spiritual, mental and physical. So that the native aptitudes and disposition of these European peoples, and therefore also the limits imposed on their institutional development by their native aptitudes and capacities, are still the same as they were in neolithic antiquity.³³

This is the same argument Veblen had presented in "Mutation Theory and the Blond Race" in 1913. So, although the logic of Veblen's own arguments had worked to obscure the contribution of biological inheritance to behavior, Veblen still retained enough of the early influences of Spencer and Darwin to prevent him from abandoning biological

³³ Veblen 1964a[[©1923]], 41. Veblen made similar comments during this period in *The Vested Interests and the Common Man* and "Economic Theory in the Calculable Future."

explanation altogether and going over completely to cultural determinism.

Veblen returned to the role of biological inheritance very explicitly in the last paper he composed, "An Experiment in Eugenics." This was written in 1927, but it was not published in his lifetime. Here Veblen argued that the population of Norway represented something close to a laboratory experiment for eugenic theories because the country had witnessed substantial emigration but little immigration. It was likely, according to eugenical speculations, that the emigrants had been the 'best and brightest.' Consequently, the descendants of the emigrant population in America should be superior to the native population who had descended from the inferior individuals who had remained at home.

Taken at face value, this paper indicates that Veblen ended his writing career with one of his strongest statements on the importance of biological inheritance for shaping human affairs. Taken at face value, Veblen sides with the stockbreeding approach to human populations that lay at the heart of eugenics and was prompting much of the hostility in the United States to immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.

However, it seems most likely that this paper should not be taken at face value. Rather than speaking in favor of eugenic theories Veblen presented a piece of extended

irony reminiscent of some of the waggish humor of his early writings. That other "experiment" that Veblen assessed in "An Early Experiment in Trusts" comes to mind. Like that article, "An Experiment in Eugenics" does contain a serious point: Norway did indeed supply a testing ground for eugenic theories. However, results were likely to run contrary to the hopes of the eugenicists. Despite his persisting faith that heredity accounted for something in the matter, Veblen did not find the approach of eugenics appealing. He indicates his views with a "backhanded" compliment to Francis Galton in *The Instinct of Workmanship*. During a discussion of heredity, Veblen claimed that the traits inherited by any member of the European population depended upon the group inheritance as a whole, rather than upon the idiosyncrasies of individual lines of descent. Veblen signaled his attitude to the alternative propositions of the "Eugenicals" in a footnote on the topic that reads as follows:

The caution is perhaps unnecessary that it is not hereby intended to suggest a doubt of Mr. Galton's researches or to question the proposals of the Eugenicals, whose labours are no doubt to be taken for all they are worth.³⁴

³⁴ Veblen 1964b[©1914], 141.

If added to this is Veblen's admiration for Norway, which amounted to chauvinism, it will appear that Veblen saw eugenicists finding only cold comfort among the fjords.³⁵

Veblen was unable to find a publisher for the final product of his wit, and the article was published posthumously by Leon Ardzrooni in a compilation of Veblen's papers.

³⁵ Isador Lubin recalled that "Veblen had a great love for Norway. Despite everything he said and wrote about patriotism, when it came to Norway he was as great a chauvinist as anybody I ever knew." Lubin 1968, 135.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

It has always been acknowledged that biology played a role in the economics of Thorstein Veblen. This role was both literal and metaphorical. It was literal in his use of the biological concepts of instincts and race as causal factors in human behavior. It was metaphorical in his application of terms and concepts from biological evolution to changes undergone by societies. Historically Veblen's literal uses of biology have received little attention. They are generally regarded as an excusable mistake for someone writing in the social Darwinist milieu at the end of the nineteenth century and as largely insignificant for the rest of Veblen's theory. This theory is usually considered to center around the cultural evolution of societies.

Recently scholars have been reassessing the literal and metaphorical uses of biology in Veblen's work. Veblen's literal uses of biology have again been rejected as largely insignificant. Indeed, it has been argued that Veblen's purpose in discussing race was to show its unimportance for determining behavior when compared with cultural factors. What has been more surprising is the amount of disagreement on Veblen's metaphorical use of biological evolution. It

has even been pointed out that Veblen provided very little detailed discussion of how the evolutionary process was actually supposed to work.

I believe that this lack of consensus has arisen from a misinterpretation of the role biology played in Veblen's work. The accepted view has been that apart from his mistaken attribution of behavior to the biological factors of instincts, and to a minor extent race, the main purpose of Veblen's contribution to economics was his metaphorical application of evolutionary ideas to socioeconomic change. Disagreements in the literature have largely concerned how closely Veblen applied the evolutionary metaphor to socioeconomic transformation.

Much of this disagreement has arisen from a failure to recognize how Veblen's use of biology changed over time. Veblen saw the biological characteristics as crucially important for his own theoretical framework and that one of his major difficulties in theory building was to explain how to integrate the biological features of human personality, that is human nature, into his socioeconomic theory. The relative lack of detailed discussion of the evolutionary process was due to Veblen's inability to explain the relationship between biology and social behavior successfully. Veblen considered biology important because, in his estimation, a modern science proceeded on the grounds of material cause and effect.

This assessment conflicts with the usual view of Veblen as essentially a cultural anthropologist of Western industrial societies. Although he appealed to instincts, his major contribution is usually taken as arising from his application of the anthropological concept of culture to Western, industrial economies. In one sense this is correct. Veblen drew heavily on anthropological literature and took a very relativistic approach to social beliefs. Consequently this view has proved sufficiently accurate for the interpretation of much of his work, in addition to being the most fruitful for the purposes of those economists who continue to work in the Veblenian tradition. Veblen's genius as a social scientist lay in his ability to view his own society with something of the detachment of a cultural anthropologist confronted with an alien tribe. This interpretation gains additional credibility as Veblen wrote during the period when anthropology was undergoing a major transformation, particularly at the hands of Franz Boas and his disciples, and cultural anthropology was taking on its twentieth century shape. The major changes were in the rejection of the evolutionary approach to cultural growth and, by-and-large, ignoring any possible explanation for differences in behavior based on biological characteristics. The rejection of these two concepts marked the major break between the ethnology of the nineteenth century and the cultural anthropology of the twentieth

century. Unfortunately, it was on biological traits and evolutionary stages that Veblen initially built his own economic theory.

Although Veblen did apply an anthropological perspective to the industrial nations, this approach was based on different premises from those of twentieth century cultural anthropologists. Veblen drew upon the theoretical conceptions employed by the evolutionary thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century. These were what he had in mind when he spoke of the modern sciences. He drew upon the comparative method that lay behind the cultural anthropology of Edward Burnet Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan; the racial anthropology of the Continental Europeans, particularly the 'Darwinian' based social selection of the anthro-po-sociologists led by Georges Vacher de Lapouge; and he drew directly from the work of Charles Darwin. However, the main model for his early evolutionary writing appears to have been the evolutionary theory of Herbert Spencer. Spencer connected human social behavior to human biology through changes in psychology. Spencer's sociology focused on the evolution of social institutions. But changes in social institutions were also accompanied by a change in the human material of society. Through a Lamarckian process of inheritance of acquired characteristics habitual patterns of thought became inherited traits. Veblen's early

work was an application of Spencer's approach, in modified form, to economic institutions.

From 1895 Veblen began developing his own theory of the evolution of economic institutions along lines similar to Spencer's sociology. The results of this work appeared in four articles, beginning with "Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?" in 1898 and ending with the publication of his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. In the articles Veblen only addresses biology directly in "The Instinct of Workmanship and the Irksomeness of Labour." There he followed Spencer in treating the biological basis of human psychology as arising through a Lamarckian process of acquired characteristics. Habitual patterns of thought would eventually become so embedded in the human brain that they became heritable.

The following year in *The Leisure Class* Veblen attempted his first exposition of the evolutionary process he was advocating. Despite the clearly Lamarckian explanation for the origin of instincts in the earlier article, Veblen was now far more ambivalent about the evolutionary process. He named the evolutionary process selective adaptation, which indicates it was some combination of selection and adaptation. However, Veblen seemed unable to decide if this process was Darwinian or Lamarckian, whether it applied to human biological

evolution and social evolution, or whether the two were interlinked or separate phenomena. Veblen's difficulties stemmed from the basic incompatibility of the different evolutionary theories he tried to blend together. The most obvious conflict arose between the Spencerian theory that required ongoing biological adaptation to changing circumstances and the racial theory of Lapouge that required changing social circumstances to select among never changing biological types. Veblen's insistence on explanations that ran in terms of cause and effect stumbled here, as he could not separate cause from effect.

Veblen's inability to disentangle the contributions of learning and inheritance to behavior retarded the development of his evolutionary theory during the first decade of the twentieth century. Although he did continue to elaborate on aspects of the evolutionary perspective in the course of discussing other topics, much of his work during this time involved critiques of economic theory. His own major theoretical contribution appeared in *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. This book was, for Veblen, of relatively narrow and short focus concerning itself mostly with those features of modern businesses that existing economic theory had failed to take into account, being tied, as it was in Veblen's opinion, to an eighteenth century view of economic relations.

Veblen's problem of separating the roles of nature from nurture in social behavior was offered at least a partial solution by the mutation theory of Hugo De Vries because mutation theory allowed Veblen to treat human nature as constant. There are signs that Veblen had accepted a constant human nature as early as 1905, although he did not publish such a view until 1913. In "Mutation Theory and the Blond Race" Veblen claimed that the European peoples and their descendants around the world were comprised of three racial types. A new racial type could only arise as a Mendelian mutation from a pre-existing type so, since no new mutants had appeared since the Ice Age, the human nature of these three types could be treated as constant over the intervening period. All human beings were similar in that there was a generic human nature. However, the different races varied from one another psychologically in the differential distribution of emphasis among the different instinctive drives.

This position represented, in effect, a fresh justification for the racial anthropology Veblen had used in *The Leisure Class*. However, it also accompanied the rejection of incremental change in human nature implied by the Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionary processes. The year after "Mutation Theory and the Blond Race," Veblen's long postponed book on the instinct of workmanship finally appeared in print.

Veblen had intended *The Instinct of Workmanship* as his second book to follow *The Leisure Class*. In subject matter and approach this book represents a logical extension of Veblen's anthropological writings in 1898-99, even in the form in which it finally appeared fifteen years later. *The Instinct of Workmanship* presents the general statement of the theoretical approach employed in the earlier specific articles and book.

Many factors probably contributed to the delay of this book. However, I have argued that one major source of difficulty proceeded from Veblen's inability to disentangle biology from culture in his work. A book like *The Instinct of Workmanship* would have been impossible to write until Veblen had clarified the evolutionary process he had first presented in *The Leisure Class*. Mutation theory avoided the problem of explaining biological changes in human nature.

Although mutation theory avoided these problems it did not, by itself, explain the relationship between the instinctive drives that compelled human beings to act and the institutional structure of habits--use and wont--that directed these instinctive impulses within a specific cultural environment. If instincts did drive people to work for improvements in human welfare, Veblen had to explain how so much human activity directed itself towards destruction and the pursuit of personal advantage. Either humans' possessed an additional set of self-regarding

instincts or the prevailing institutional structure could simply overwhelm the native bents of the human race. Even with human nature held constant, the logic of Veblen's own arguments left the contribution of instinctive drives to actual behavior far from certain.

And other things had changed since *The Leisure Class*. In a very short time the validity of the comparative method had been undermined, leading to the evolutionary stages of cultural growth being dropped from anthropology. Instinct theory also attracted serious challenges from both biologists and psychologists forcing Veblen to handle the topic more cautiously in *The Instinct of Workmanship* than he had done hitherto.

In his next book, *Imperial Germany*, Veblen dropped the word instinct while retaining the concept under the term propensity. If *The Instinct of Workmanship* raised doubts in Veblen's mind over the usefulness of instinct as an explanatory variable, *Imperial Germany* demonstrated how variations in culture could completely overwhelm the influence of racial characteristics. In attempting to illuminate the role of biology in determining economic behavior Veblen had led himself to the same spot as the new cultural anthropologists--to explain human behavior biology proved largely irrelevant.

World War I and the ensuing events directed Veblen's writing towards current affairs more than ever before. He

never again attempted an elaboration of the biological determinants of behavior nor of the process of socioeconomic evolution.

Despite advocating an evolutionary approach to economics Veblen never achieved a coherent articulation of how the institutional structure of society actually did evolve. I believe this failure was due, in part, to Veblen's adherence to a biological basis for human behavior. Veblen's attempts to articulate the evolutionary process flounder on the role of human nature in this process. After each failed articulation, Veblen was forced to modify his conception of biology's role until, in the end, he had no role left for it to play. But even then he seemed unwilling to deny that biology did make an important contribution--only he had been unable to identify what that contribution was.

Looking back from the end of the twentieth century, it seems obvious that Veblen's major contribution lay in applying the approach of cultural anthropology to the Western, industrial societies. Veblen's discussions of race and instincts now appear as largely irrelevant encumbrances to his socioeconomic theory, ones that can be dropped without changing the essential message in his writings. Scholars who see themselves as continuing the Veblenian tradition have encountered no difficulties by simply

ignoring Veblen's passages on biology and proceeded with cultural explanations for behavior.

Looking forward from the second half of the nineteenth century a different picture emerges, one that was closer to Veblen's own view of the situation. Veblen was educated in the social Darwinist milieu of that period and was a self-confessed "disciple" of Herbert Spencer. He believed economics should be brought into line with the modern evolutionary sciences and, in particular, it should adopt the standpoint of the then modern psychology and anthropology. Most of the areas Veblen drew upon explained socioeconomic behavior in terms of biological characteristics, or at least saw biological characteristics and socioeconomic behavior as closely intertwined phenomena. It would be strange if Veblen had been so detached from his time as to transform all of these biological influences into metaphor. Even the anthropology that made least use of evolutionary biology, such as that of Morgan and Tylor, was very different from the cultural anthropology Boas and his followers were to develop in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Veblen began his career with a strong belief in the contribution biological traits made to economic behavior. This belief seems to have been sufficiently entrenched that Veblen was unwilling to reject it even after his own analysis appeared to undermine its credibility. This

adherence to biological factors ran back to the influence of Darwinian science on Veblen's philosophical perspective. The modern, evolutionary sciences proceeded on the assumed grounds of material cause and effect. This required, necessarily, the assumption of a link between social behavior and human biology. As Veblen observed in *The Instinct of Workmanship*, some physiological connection must exist between the causes of behavior and the physical individual in order to avoid the assumption of a sheer break standing between the physical and immaterial phenomena of life.

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VITA

Raymond Anthony Maynard was born on 22nd January, 1959 in London, United Kingdom the oldest child of Kenneth and Jean Maynard. He grew up in Plympton, England where he attended Plympton Grammar School. He completed his undergraduate work at the University of Sussex, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in Economics with a minor in Economic History. Since 1988 he has lived in North America, and now resides in Lancaster, Pennsylvania with his wife, Eiman.