

# Knowledge and Skill

by Lindy Davies

“It is not in skill, but in the knowledge which can be communicated from one to another, that the civilized man shows his superiority to the savage”, wrote Henry George in *The Science of Political Economy*. The original Henry George School course in *Economic Science* declared that “Knowledge is the more important [than skill] because it can be stored and transmitted in many efficient ways, thus enabling human society to continually advance.”

In Henry George’s day this seemed to be a no-brainer. Knowledge, applied in the form of labor-saving technology, made possible a vast increase in the productive power of labor. The power of human skills seemed quaint by comparison — as shown by the example George chose: that of an aboriginal boomerang-thrower. In the late nineteenth century, the importance and power of human knowledge was thought to so far surpass that of human skill that it seemed ludicrous to compare the two.

A hundred years later, society has reached the other side of the industrial revolution. As labor became ever more divided and specialized, “making a living” came to be further and further separated from any personal involvement in one’s work. Ever-more specialized knowledge came to be applied to everything people do, and to everything they use. For most people, making a living has become a matter of availing oneself of a marketable “specialty” that will command better-than-average wages. Workers without special skills seek the protection of a trade union to protect their livelihoods from “scabs” who were willing to perform their undemanding jobs for lower pay.

For consumers, the march of specialization progressively eroded people’s sense of involvement with, or control over, the things they use in day-to-day life. Goods and services were designed and produced by experts, and when they didn’t work, experts had to be called in to repair them. The struggle to compete in increasingly specialized job markets left people no time for developing “skills” — not until they retired, at least, when they could then take up a “hobby”. It seemed that the triumph of knowledge over skill was complete.

However, it began to dawn on people, as civilization began to turn into what some call a “postindustrial” society, that some important things had been given up along the seemingly straight path toward efficiency. We were being told to “trust the experts” — but how did we know that the “experts” knew what they were doing, or were telling us the truth?

And yet — the benefits of advanced knowledge and specialization are undeniable. Without them, we could scarcely hope even to feed an expanding population. Must we simply endure the lack of choice, the feeling of

being lost and disempowered, that seems to come with modern “production”? Is that simply the price of progress?

Surprisingly, our search for clear, consistent terms in the study of political economy can point a way out of this conundrum.

With the advancement of knowledge, the “body economic” becomes vastly more efficient at producing wealth. But, what is the goal of production? Is it to produce “stuff” — ever-greater piles of widgets? No. The goal of production is to satisfy human desires. A factory can churn out widgets all night and day, but if they do not satisfy human desires, those widgets are worthless. They are no longer wealth; they are merely a waste.

Those post-industrial yearnings we mentioned a moment ago — for a sense of involvement and empowerment — are human desires, too. People are willing to pay for their satisfaction. For example, let’s say that you want a coffee table. What are your options? You could collect the tools and materials, slowly learn the necessary skills, and make a table for yourself. You could commission a local carpenter to build a table to your specifications. You could go to a high-class furniture store and purchase a table crafted by expert woodworkers. Or, you could drive to the suburban Big-box and buy a table that had been made far away by exploited workers you will never meet, and sold in a store that sells for less.

Which of those options would be more attractive to you? Each consumer might weigh the factors differently. Yet we do know that the less time and money consumers have to put toward acquiring a coffee table, the more they will be drawn to the Big-box. The more people go to the Big-box, the cheaper and more convenient Big-box merchandise will become. What an odd situation! Yet there we have it: in an economy where many people are trying to hang onto their middle-class status while real wages keep falling, there is a boom market for cheap consumer goods, made by exploited foreigners and sold in Big Boxes.

Now, make no mistake about it: a prodigious application of knowledge went into providing that coffee table. Just knowing how to build a table is the least of it! It had to be engineered to be produced for the lowest possible cost of material and labor, in some remote place, efficiently packaged and delivered just in time. We might not really like the products we buy at the Big-box, but we can’t deny that they usually represent the best deal. Folks would very much like to buy a coffee table that could be delivered to their living room by means of a bit less (depersonalized, specialized) knowledge — and a big more good, old-fashioned skill. Oddly enough, the very labor-saving processes that result from the application of knowledge are the means by which society can ultimately be liberated *(continued on page 45)*

This is the gist of Henry George: that neither the spirit, the mind or the body of man can rightfully be enchained, whether socially, politically or economically. It is truly a philosophy of freedom. Its strength lies in its inner force, not in its outward power. And if it seems a rather weak force to stand in a world where apparently might alone prevails, let the promise be remembered that "the meek shall inherit the earth." **GJ**

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## Neo-Georgism

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itself Marxist. Does this indicate that Marxism has proved itself a viable system, and that the thought of George is nothing but a burned-out meteor that once briefly lit the sky of social protest and reform? Scarcely.

Marxism has not, in point of fact, demonstrated its viability as a system. It is rife with ambiguities and contradictions, both philosophical and economic, while to the extent that it may be said to have been implemented with any degree of material success, its toll in human life and freedom has been so great as to render it utterly repugnant to all but the most callous. For the effectiveness of Marxism lies neither in its cogency as an intellectual system nor in its utility as a constructive program; it lies rather in its propaganda value as a revolutionary myth — a myth with spurious but well-advertised pretensions to scientific authority and historical inevitability. It is these pretensions, providing as they do both an aureole of seeming dignity and a promise of triumph to the aspirations of the "have-nots," that give Marxism its potent appeal to the mass-minded and cause it to be embraced, at least in name, by so many of the power-seekers who pose as saviors to the "wretched of the earth." **GJ**

## Skill and Knowledge

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from over-reliance on them. It is by utilizing the labor-saving powers of technology, the results of the application of knowledge, that we can — potentially, at least — free up enough time and exertion to explore acquiring skills — which can, of course, be satisfying in itself.

I suspect that if Henry George were writing today, he would see knowledge as more important than skill only for seeing civilization through a certain stage of its development (just as skill was more important in an earlier, pretechnological stage). At a later stage, though, I think George would have discovered, like modern society is discovering today, that it is only through a healthy integration of knowledge *and* skill that society can use the benefits of technological progress without falling into the trap of dehumanization and alienation. **GJ**