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TREATMENT OF CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS IN THE TEACHING OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

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The teacher of political economy cannot be "neutral" in controversial questions, "giving all sides" and letting it go at that. Such questions are not isolated, but fit into a pattern of development which will be different for different teachers. The teacher is not so much an advocate of views as he is a reporter on observations. The honest teacher makes himself the ally of history as he understands it; believing that after all economics is an art rather than a science, he necessarily makes room for deliberate social purpose. The usefulness of quantitative methods should not blind us to the essentially qualitative character of the subject. Every great teacher of political economy had a thesis. Those who refused to take a position added little to thought or action, and are forgotten. "Indoctrination" does not imply neglect to explore and to refute. It means simply scrupulous inspection plus earnest recommendation.

In political economy, over a period, principle derives from practice, and not the other way round. Sanction follows social convenience. Evolution in doing compels evolution in doctrine. This does not mean that local and temporary and partisan interest can immediately alter received rules. And where there is a wider and more permanent change of advantage, there is still the celebrated lag which makes for gradual warping rather than sudden abandonment of old theorems. It is commonplace that a minority equipped with control of the social means of production may for long keep law and morals on its side. But in the economist's beloved "long run" we learn by living, and do not live by learning.

This is lesson number 1 in the teaching of political economy. Unless one recognizes that in economic life there is no absolute, and that trends in thought follow trends in performance, he is not attempting to study social behavior but is trying to define a theology. Writings reduced to something like system the elaborate opportunism which went by the name of mercantilism. After these coercive public policies had been eaten into by private initiative, the *laissez faire* philosophy was seized upon eagerly because it justified what was already familiar conduct. And now that individualist enterprise has grown out of all anticipated proportions, and thus taken on, inevitably, the collectivist character, the propriety of public control is again urged. This is historical development, with the unexpected becoming, after a time, orthodox.

There have been variants, of course, within the larger cycle. Consider the dissent from classical doctrine inspired by American geographical and economic conditions at the beginning of the last century. Here was a country not of decreasing but of increasing returns, in which accessions to population meant not resort to poorer natural resources but to richer, with the consequence of a larger product for each worker. Instead of growing economic stringency, as in old countries, there was progressive liberation. In place of attention to the division of labor, association of labor was the need. The

intervention of government, as in enactment of protective tariffs, was not regarded as meddling limitations of the individual, but was beneficial employment of united power. America was economically buoyant and not, like England, apprehensive. Before the eyes of the American was always potential surplus, not threatened reduction to mere subsistence. And so the despairing Malthusian principle of population and the forebodings of Ricardian rent were refuted by dwellers in the American Garden of Eden who had beheld the tree of life and not yet tasted its forbidden fruit. Contrast the Careys with the Mills. The former sped gaily up the rainbow, while the latter pair, not so clothed in light, tried to chart a prudent path ere dusk turned to darkness. Alexander Hamilton helped teach Friedrich List that the nation, as a political and economic entity, stood between the individual and the cosmos; it could serve its turn in promoting wealth and well-being, and so accepted dogma must be adjourned for the nonce.

Thus, in its historical sweep, all economic theory is grandly inductive—a million particulars gathered up, somewhat belatedly, into a few generalizations. Promptings to volunteer action, be they numerous enough and long enough continued, are after a time tolerated, are then expected, and end by becoming dominant. Erstwhile dissenters, when theory has come to their rescue, find themselves comfortable conformists, only to pass later into dictatorship which carries in itself the seeds of its own destruction.

If, then, there is constant change of practice, with validating doctrine at an interval behind, the teacher of economic principles has a permanent task of interpretation. How explain the new adventure in the light of the old axiom? Which experiments are evanescent, and which are destined to remake the rules? Which are light airs that merely ripple and feather the sea, and which is the wind that will bring the wave?

We often speak of "a controversial question" as though it were isolated in time, a thing to be decided on its separate merits. It is in this view that the teacher is enjoined to "give both sides," to "preserve an objective attitude." Doubtless there are such economic asteroids, as it were, floating in a universe, and not magnetically joined, so far as we can determine, to any larger mass. These offer the teacher an exercise in studied neutrality. But matters of larger moment, where strong beliefs are prompted by important interests, are not so disconnected. To the teacher aware of his subject, these belong in a sequence which he thinks he discerns, they fit into a pattern, they have their places in generalization. How may they be divorced from the train of events, the line of development, to which they seem to belong? It is a shallow and immature perception which regards relief legislation, gold standard, and anti-trust acts, for instance, as objects of scrutiny for their own sakes merely. A great teacher once told me how his self-esteem was destroyed. He had used three months in laying before a class the causes and course of the French Revolution. When he had settled back with some

satisfaction, the student who sat nearest his desk asked, "Well, Professor, was the French Revolution right or wrong?"

Any teacher of political economy likely to give his students anything believes he has observed certain tendencies, and tries to project these trends. In exposition he will not be guilty of sins of conscious omission. He will not want to put blinders on his students. He will treasure detail, explore doubts, probe contradictions, beg for refutation. But honesty will compel him to assign causes and seek for consequences. He has a theme, a rhythm runs in his head, he cannot be satisfied until there is a completeness, until the circle, to the best of his understanding, is closed. And in accordance with this intellectual method he will interpret the particular issue.

The notion that the teacher, especially of the elementary class, may be neutral is absurd on the face of it. Is the blind to lead the blind? The simplest fact, so called, can scarcely be conveyed without indicating the impulse behind it and the force which follows from it. Insistence that the teacher should never indoctrinate, should be an intellectual eunuch, has gained from emphasis upon the quantitative method in economics and other of the social sciences. The ambition to make economics an exact science prompts the exclusion of opinion. Qualitative judgments are to be eschewed, the relative is to be reduced to the precise. A census, a mere enumeration faithfully taken is supposed to disclose a result unsuspected, much in the way that obedient rubbing of the jar brought the genie. The symbols of a formula become the servants of truth, and a graph has authority in every peak and trough. Surmise gives way to certainty; "perhaps" and "probably" sink like the waning moon, while the blessed sun of "proof" rises in the opposite quarter of the heavens.

My own brief seduction to this view was speeded by my inability to understand the mathematics employed by the disciplinarians to whom I listened. I abandoned the exactitude which was enjoined and was ready, in an act of faith, to declare them miracle men. Disillusionment was swift as conversion, and doubtless appealed to firmer intellects than mine. A prominent and patently honest scholar who had been a leader in forming the Econometric Society counseled those who subscribed for his investment service to buy more common stock on the very eve of the crash of 1929. I should have allowed for accident. We are frail vessels, imperfect instruments of great purposes. With returning hope I listened to this gentleman's explanation to the subsequent meeting of the Association of how he came to be exactly mistaken. But the slide rule, which has been the emblem of the old faith, became limp, its graduations blurred beyond recognition. The rod of Aaron was flung down, and wriggled like a snake.

I have not time, if I had knowledge, to review the long discussion as to whether political economy is a science or an art. Nor can I expect you to be very interested in my unsupported notion that it is the latter, that design

for the future may be joined to derivation from the past. Economic determinism, which is the loose formula of the collectivist, means that prior conduct has a bearing upon subsequent development, but does not forget that what we do now helps to shape the compulsions under which we shall some day rest. The wish need not be impotent in economic affairs. Exhortation may be quite as powerful as the savings of large-scale production. There is the element of conscious control. Moral force may have its place beside magnitudes susceptible of more precise statement. Consider how one field after another, supposed to exemplify the action and interaction of almost mechanical impulses, has been invaded by extra-economic designs, so that the automatic has given way to the induced result. For example foreign exchange, sometimes pictured as an area in which insensate economic electrons collided, has been disarranged, even destroyed, by the passions of peoples. The value of gold, so universal as to be acknowledged almost intrinsic, has been pretty much abolished in the monetary sphere. It hardly forms any more even a standard of reference. We wonder whether the only values are not political rather than economic. I am not forgetting the economic causes which have roused and egged on the hates of nations, but am only saying that we may not neglect, in trying to discern the economic future, what stands in the foreground of the present. The tracing of a line on a map may enlist more expenditure of wealth than the building of power dams or the construction of railways. The enduring of hunger for the sake of a shibboleth may seem more desirable than full bellies. Resuscitated pagan deities may preside over economic forces with a sway vastly superior to any accountant's calculation of profit and loss. When Lenin arrived at the Finland station in Petrograd in 1917, for all that he was a Marxist, more had come to Russia than exhaustion from the war, more than a reminder of the dogma of class conflict.

If we may allow, then, that economic development has been and is quite as much an art as it is a science, why not prepare practitioners? The physical result of mixing pigments will be the same when done in a vat in a paint factory, but what differences appear when the instrument is the brush of this painter or that! One gives us yellow ochre, another sunlight. One presents us with the degree of refraction of light which we call violet, while the more skillful records a luminous shadow.

Some say that we should not surrender to apparent imponderables by contenting ourselves with qualitative judgments about them, but should organize statistical attack. Where definition and curve and formula do not resolve doubts, then the teacher's rôle is neutrality. He must be a mirror which his students may turn this way and that to reflect from every angle. But the teacher cannot be a cipher in his own equations. He knows that what often pass for objective economic forces are truly the expressions of individual or, oftener, group interests. Much that is pictured as imponder-

able, fit to balk conclusion, is ponderable enough. It is perhaps the protest of a distant father who has received a garbled report of something the instructor said in class. Or an ancient rich trustee threatens to resign from the board if a man with such and such opinions is kept on the faculty. It is to be noted that students rarely call an instructor unfair. The outcry usually comes from persons who never heard the man teach for five minutes, and in this list may often be included officers of administration. Each of the great teachers of political economy had a thesis, and it had the most important social implications. Smith tried to demolish commercial restrictions and to invite freedom. Malthus assailed the optimists of his day. Mill is more distinguished for his doubts about the capitalist system than for his attachment to it. Marx and George and Veblen carried crusades. The mere expositors, the patient amenders are remembered only by writers on the history of economic thought. What should we think, today, of the man who, in the name of "objective teaching," would have stopped the mouth of Adam Smith? Or read the record of the questions put to Henry George at a meeting in London by economists so excellent as Alfred Marshall and Arnold Toynbee; the man with a mission was confronted by the merely circumspect, and his reach for a better society certainly helped his reasoning.

We can turn out plenty of teachers well enough acquainted with economic literature and able to give an orderly account to classes. But they are sterile, and wake nothing in their students, unless they see beneficial drifts in society and do what they can, in the classroom and out of it, to help these forward.

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