
The Teaching of Economics in the Secondary Schools

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THE TEACHING OF ECONOMICS IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

A GENERAL DISCUSSION OPENED BY PROFESSOR SIMON N. PATTEN,
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Professor Patten: There are a few facts that need to be stated in order that one may understand the present situation and why such a discussion as this is forced upon us at present. Just as I said yesterday afternoon, so I say now, it is the conditions that are forcing the discussion. The real problem is to bring out the causes, the relations, the philosophy. We economists do not differ at all from others in the insistence upon the necessity of dealing with facts; it is merely in the emphasis to be laid on facts. The immediate cause of this discussion is the report of the Committee of Ten called for by the school masters in the secondary schools on account of a confusion that exists in the secondary schools and destroys the former relations between them and the colleges. The condition had become so bad that some change needed to be made.

The discussion this morning is practically in another form the discussion of yesterday afternoon; on the one hand we have a group of sociologists coming in and taking the field that economists have had in the past, and on the other hand we have historians doing the same. I do not find any fault with this. But let us consider some facts that have not yet been mentioned. In the last century the powerful thinkers, the men who made this century, were of that group called utilitarians or economists—they were of *our* group. There is no question about that. We economists are the inheritors of this line of thinking; not the historians. Then they were talking about details—names and records of kings

and things of that kind. Now they have broadened their conception of their science. That is well, but certainly the historians have no right to put a false interpretation upon what economic theory is. That is what I am contending against. I want an interpretation put upon economic theory in harmony with the development of the English speaking races. We have no quarrel in any way with the historians. It is merely when they overlook the history of thought and philosophy, and put us in a false position, that we object. It is good that they should wake up, become energetic and active, and even that they should claim the whole field for themselves; but let them not misinterpret the history of the past; let them not misinterpret the causes that have given us our 19th century civilization.

The economist has to do primarily with conscious, calculating thoughts of results. We want to get our children into the habit of conscious calculation, of judging from cause to effect. Now the historical habit is different. It also should be acquired. But I contend that the habit of conscious calculation should not be left until maturity. The working of conscious self-interest is active in the child from the very beginning, and this activity must be kept up, developed and trained at every stage through life. If this is the aim of economics, the science is put in the wrong group in the classification of the Committee of Ten. If economists are cousins to the historians and sociologists, they are half-brothers to geographers and physicists. We ought in the high school to study the physical environment; that lies next to economics. Then after that we ought to have conscious study of the development of economic ideas.

Professor Henry C. Adams: The point in dispute between the last two speakers is an exceedingly interest-

ing and instructive one. I cannot, however, take sides strongly with either of the disputants, for it is impossible for me to separate these two things, history of industrial development and analysis of industrial theory. To my mind the importance of industrial history lies in the fact that it throws clear light upon theory and enables us easily, and without using big language, to explain economic problems.

The question before us according to the program pertains to the place of economics in the secondary schools, which, as I understand it, embrace city high schools, as well as academies, and should be approached from at least two points of view. One should, in the first place, inquire what secondary schools are for, and whether political economy as a study is in harmony with that purpose; and in the second place, one should ask if it is wise to undertake so abstract a subject as the theory of economy in advance of a careful survey of industrial history. That there may be no mistake respecting my position in this matter, I would say definitely that I am inclined to protest against the introduction of theoretic economy into secondary schools, first, in the interest of the schools themselves, and second, in the interest of theoretic economy.

We must distinguish in this discussion between the high school on the one hand, whose chief function in the community is that of people's college, and the academy on the other, which is designed to prepare pupils for colleges and universities. The wider purpose of the high school makes the adjustment of its curriculum the more difficult, the chief source of difficulty arising from the fact that some of the pupils enrolled desire to enter the university, while others intend to pass directly to their trades or professions. The curriculum of the

high school must have regard to the educational needs of both of these classes of pupils.

The object of the people's college is, primarily, to afford discipline (there is nothing very original in that), and secondly, to enable pupils to understand the forces which touch their own lives, or which will touch them when they become independent members of society. Now, so far as discipline is concerned, one study is just about as good as another, provided the different kinds of discipline are recognized and provision made for instruction in each. To illustrate my point: There is a line of thinking which we call scientific thinking; but it is not necessary that botany and geology, anatomy and other biological sciences, and chemistry should all be taught. If properly studied, the interpretation of scientific reasoning can just as well be gotten from one of these studies as from all of them, and it is much better that one of these studies should be followed thoroughly than that all should be studied in a superficial manner. Another line of reasoning is implied by the word mathematics; yet another by the word history, and another by the language group of studies. My point is that if the student upon leaving the high school has acquired familiarity with these various lines of reasoning, these various disciplines, I may term them, the high school has satisfied one of the purposes for which it is organized. There is nothing in the principles of political economy essential to this primary discipline, and this being the case, it would seem wiser to lay greater stress upon those subjects for which the teachers are better prepared. The force of this position rests upon the fact that trained economists who are willing to take positions in the high schools are not to be found, and so difficult is it to obtain that training that I

question whether we shall be able to secure any considerable number of high school teachers capable of teaching this subject in the near future. As a wise sage said in ancient times, it is a condition and not a theory that confronts us.

My second protest against the teaching of political economy in the high schools is presented in the name of sound economic thinking. I should much prefer in the interest of economy itself, that more time be given to the historical studies, a different turn being given to them, than that the so-called principles of political economy should be taken up. It is almost impossible for a mature man, even a well trained man, to understand the ins and outs of a difficult economic problem, so far as its theory is concerned. Why? Because he is inclined to regard commercial rights and duties as stationary in character. It is true that men like Professor Clark and Professor Patten, and indeed all the theoretical economists, appreciate that truths are relative and that industrial conditions are in process of development, but as was said here yesterday afternoon, what teachers assert upon matters of this sort is not of as much importance as the impression which they leave. And I ask any teacher who has endeavored to introduce young men into the practical questions of economy, if it is an easy matter to impress upon them that economic truths are to a certain extent hypothetical and conditional. We very well know, at least that has been my personal experience, that it is with great difficulty that this can be done.

I, therefore, in my own teaching place, as preliminary to the study of systematic economy, a careful study of English industrial society, and I have found that students so trained come to a discussion of economic prob-

lems with a better preparation than would otherwise be the case. And I have further observed that when they come to an analysis of economic theories (this is the fourth stage, as I lay it down, in the development of economic study—the first being economic history; the second, a general survey of the principles of political economy; the third, a study of economic problems; and the fourth, the study of economic theory), they are able to grasp the meaning of economic theories. The study of theory is put at the wrong end of the curriculum when taught in the high schools. It is the most severe of all disciplines, and should not be thrust upon untutored minds.

But it may be asserted that in a democratic country the people must be instructed in economics. With that I agree most heartily, but venture to suggest that economics does not necessarily mean political economy. The chief requisite of a good citizen is that he should be able to appreciate, and feel, and understand those forces that touch his life. One of the most common sources of error respecting general social problems is that men cannot distinguish the temporary, fleeting movements of society from those which really make the character of the age in which they live. Now one cannot hope to separate the temporary from the permanent, except he has before him a picture of the great movements of the race from the time when society existed in status down to the present, when it exists under the form of voluntary association or contract. Consider, for example, the question of strikes, of arbitration, of the legalization of trades unions, of the control of corporations,—all of these questions pertain more or less in form, though not necessarily in essence, to a return to the condition of status. This is a fact which ought to be present to the

mind of every citizen, otherwise his thinking upon public questions of this sort must tend inevitably to the subversion of the social order; and the high school, in adjusting its curriculum upon history and economics, should set before itself as a task of prime necessity to so train the minds of pupils that they will easily, quickly, indeed spontaneously, appreciate the fact that to adopt certain proposed solutions of industrial problems will lead society back to the old condition of status.

My thought relative to the relation of economics to secondary education is suggested by the following question: Should we not obtain better results both in the direction of discipline and of practical utility, so far as public industrial questions are concerned, if, instead of putting abstract political economy into the curriculum of our schools, we introduced by the side of political history the economic and industrial history of the English speaking people? It seems to me that in this manner pupils would be prepared in a way they cannot otherwise be prepared to appreciate economic theory, when they come to the time appropriate for this study; but of more importance than this, we should train a set of men able to see the bearing of the great industrial and social problems of the day.

Professor Lindley M. Keasbey: If you mean by "economics," theoretical political economy, then I would say we do not want it in the public schools. What I would have in the schools is some knowledge of economic facts. Most of our young men grow up and enter college without any idea of the commonest facts of the world about them. We teach geography in the schools; we teach history in the schools. The geographies we use, however, are entirely political, mainly pictorial. I

should like these geographies one and all taken out, and maps and text books so arranged that, in the first place, there should be a general survey of physical and economic geography. From the study of this I should like to have the conclusion drawn that the successful economies of mankind have developed in the temperate zone. Then I should like to have the book take up the physical geography of Europe. First the orographic conditions of that unit should be described. Then I should like to see the hydrographic, the climatic, the geognostic, and finally the geographic conditions of that particular unit set forth. Then the book should go on to enumerate and define the races of mankind and show how the Aryan family of the white race came to inhabit these countries of Europe. Having traced the migrations of the races very roughly, I should like the next volume of the geography to begin with what we speak of as historical geography and demography. Thus I should like the students to be taught how the different families of the Aryan race came to form the political and economic organizations of to-day. Finally, I should have a summary of these European states brought before the mind of the pupils, that they might know what these states are each one now doing in economics and politics.

When we come to America we have entirely different conditions. We have no small geographical units. We have no migrations of races. If we do find North America separated by mountain barriers, the people who came here were able to cross them. If there were different climatic conditions in North America, the people who came here were able to live in almost all of them. So we should have to divide North America up according to a basis of geology. We should have to look to the drainage, the soil, the conditions of hydrography,

the conditions as regards mountains, etc., until we had divided the map into natural economic divisions. Then I would pursue the same plan with the colonization of America. Instead of dealing with the migration of races, we should be dealing, however, with the colonization by European peoples. Finally by going back over these different economic sections, I would show what particular people have settled in each section, what characteristics they have shown in economics and politics; and what each section is now doing and may do in an economic way.

This work in geography and demography would seem to me to give a frame work of ideas to the young students. I should then take our political histories and instill into them some economic ideas. I agree with Professor Adams perfectly that the history of English economic industry is what our pupils should learn. But I would supplement that with something of American industrial history; with some idea of the way in which our frontiersmen have cleared the way toward the West.

This is what I mean by teaching economics in the public schools. It means a reform of the study of geography and it means an addition to the study of history.

Dr. Edward T. Devine: I am very glad that this discussion has not become merely a perfunctory endorsement on our part of the idea that political economy ought to be taught in the public schools. The only reason, I suppose, why the Committee of Ten, or the conference to whom this subject was referred, recommended that political economy should not be taught in any formal way in public schools, is that there has never been on the part of economists themselves any formal statement that in

their opinion such teaching would be either possible or profitable.

It is said that there are no suitable text-books but this is by no means proven. It is said that there are no trained teachers, that teachers are not in a position to take up the teaching of political economy. If it is meant that what we want in the schools is the introduction of only those subjects for which conventional methods have been worked out, for which there are text-books outlining the exact methods by which teachers have been presenting those subjects for generations, it may be that political economy is not suitable. But subjects of the kind I have mentioned are those that ought, when the curriculum is crowded, to be taken out. I believe we ought often to put into the public schools the kind of subject that can be taught only by a person who is able to adapt himself to new methods, who is able to do some original work. This gives a favorable condition for natural selection in the schools. I believe we ought to have some tests to make it obvious that poor teaching is being done. It is therefore a kind of recommendation for the introduction of political economy into the schools, that it could be taught only by persons who are wide awake, by persons who are able to find out for themselves the right method.

What is then the subject matter that ought to be taught? The answer I would make is suggested by the scheme Professor Giddings has given us. Professor Adams insists upon the fact that you should give to the child that kind of training which will best fit him to understand the forces he is to meet with in subsequent life. If then he is to come into contact with physical forces, with ethical forces, if he is to have occasion to use logical methods and mathematical formulæ, we

must teach him all these. Is there not still a gap, however, if you do not teach him to understand also economic phenomena, if you do not train him to intelligent observation of industrial and economic facts?

Notwithstanding the report of the Committee of Ten, which did not represent adequately the views of economists on the subject, I would submit that there is a considerable and respectable economic opinion in favor of the formal teaching of economics in the schools. The very emphatic recommendations of the President of this Association, both in public discussion and in print, carry great weight and are unequivocally in favor of this position. As further evidence of the possibility of doing such work in the schools, I would point to the same President, to the distinguished former President of this Association, and to the most eminent living economist in England, all of whom have indirectly given expression to their opinion that this can be done, by furnishing us useful text-books suitable for the purpose,—text-books, I venture to say, as good as the text-books used in the formal teaching of history or of English literature in our schools.

Professor William W. Folwell: I agree with Professor Adams that it would not be wise to introduce political economy as it now exists in our books or in the notes of our teachers, into the public schools. At the same time, it seems to me that the art of economizing, in the noble sense of that term, is one that should be taught from the earliest childhood. I believe that to be a valuable part of education. I find students coming to me as Juniors who do not know what a factory is, how a mill is run, what a bill of lading is, what a bill of exchange is; who know hardly anything about the economic phenomena going on about them. Those things

can well be taught to children and to some extent are taught in what are called the "general lessons" of our lower schools. Our children may at an early age be familiarized with the phenomena of business and of the economic world.

While agreeing with Professor Adams that political economy should not now be taught in the public schools, I believe it should at some day be taught in the high schools. Professor Adams has wisely said of the high schools, especially those of the West, that they are to be the people's colleges. In the city of Minneapolis there are four high schools with some three thousand pupils in them. Probably two hundred of those will enter college. The remainder will go out into life from the high school. I submit that if those young people could carry with them some systematic knowledge of economics, it would be very useful to them and to society. But there is no room for that now; the curriculum is over crowded.

What is to be the solution is a matter upon which I have thought for many years, and I have this to suggest. In the first place, the production of text-books which shall be better adapted for the use in high schools than those which now exist. The other thing is to extend the work of the high schools. I think it not rash to prophesy that some of the young men here to-day will see the time when the high schools of our cities and larger towns will have extended their work to embrace the first two years of the college course. There is not a particle of sense in a boy studying part of his algebra in school and going to college for the rest; or in reading two books of Livy in school and going to college for the rest. The secondary education of America must be developed as it has been developed in other civilized states to cover a certain epoch of education. When

the high school of the United States shall have been developed to occupy the field it should occupy, there will be room for several things which may not now be undertaken. There will be room, I suggest, for political economy, and I think that great service will be done in those developed high schools of America in giving the elements of that science to the young people who in countless thousands will complete their education in those schools.

Dr. Ernst Von Halle: If I were to carry out the line of thought suggested by Professor Patten and Professor Giddings, I should first ask, What is economics?

I have been in this country for two years studying economics and I leave the country convinced that everybody here has an economics of his own. Now if you want to introduce that science into the public schools, the first consequence will be that instead of five or six hundred economists you will have twenty or thirty thousand, I suppose, and I doubt if this would do much to clear the field of political discussion.

I think there is no economist or sociologist in Europe who is not sure that sociology is a very wide field, of which economics is a very small but important part, and there is no economist in Europe who does not believe that the teaching of economics embraces the teaching of economic history, of statistics, of present economic conditions, etc. To-day, I confess that I do not think there is much teaching of economics in this country. There is much teaching of economic theory, a little teaching of economic institutions, a very little teaching of economic history; but that a man should be taught what it all means, how it relates to the policy of the country, how important are its bearings upon a flourishing industrial life, this I must confess does not seem to have oc-

curred to the teachers of the subject. In no college in this country have I found a *complete* course of economic subjects. I have found much sociology, heaps of theory, but where is the study of institutions? A little railroads, a very little banking, some teaching of other institutions; but no all-embracing economics. I feel very sure that theory is a most important part of economic knowledge. But it seems to me that it is also a most important part of the duty of the teacher of economics to make his pupils understand the practical questions of the day. Do you think that the country profits more by a meeting of the leading economists which discusses these theoretical questions, than by one which discusses the practical problems, labor strikes, trusts, first of all banking and money? Or do you think a long discussion upon theory will make business men understand that there is a life of the nation which is growing and developing, that the leaders in this life, in the long run, can not be the business men who are engaged with private affairs, but must be the trained economists and administrators? Economic history ought to make men practical economists. Economic theory ought to enable a man to understand the problems of his time.

The people are startled by trusts and combinations because they do not know what they mean. The country is in despair over the financial question. The banks are disturbed because they do not know what is going to come out of it. Do you think this is the last end of economic studies,—to leave these great questions and give us no light as to the answer, except that “our theory will tell you what this ought to be?”

Professor E. J. James here made some remarks in favor of the introduction of economics into the secondary schools.

Professor Simon Newcomb : If there is any student of society who thinks that we can understand the society of to-day without understanding how it came to be what it is by a development which has extended through the ages, or if there is any person who fails to see that we are passing through a transition stage, and that things in the twentieth century will be in many respects essentially different from those in the eighteenth ; if, I say, there is any such person, I do not know where to find him. But from what has been said it seems that there are some who think the theoretical or deductive method is of little use in understanding economic facts. In holding that view, we are simply throwing economics outside of the pale of all science. There can be no science that is not based on abstraction. The whole public policy of this country, both as regards government policy, as regards subjects of legislation by the general government, the corporate policy of the United States, and as regards the economic movements of great bodies of the citizens in the labor organizations, are based on a few abstract principles which we might state in a dozen sentences. That is the condition of affairs which we have to meet, and we can meet it only by other and sounder abstractions. The only way to do this is to have a large body of men educated in the application, and correct application of such abstractions.

Professor F. H. Giddings : I think that the greatest educational danger, in the discussion of this topic, lies in the probability that we shall confuse the question of teaching economic truths with the question of teaching a system of political economy. Personally I should be opposed to any plan that would put the teaching of a system of political economy into the secondary schools. But we need not therefore refrain from teaching to

school children some elementary economic truths. We do not put into the lower schools a complete system of astronomy, of physics, or of biology, but we see to it that the boy of ten years has some few correct astronomical and physical ideas. If we are to have intelligent citizenship in the United States our boys and girls must be taught some elementary truths of political economy. The real solution of this problem is in getting teachers who know the difference between economic nonsense and economic sense, not in getting text-books.

I should like to say in answer to a statement by Dr. Von Halle that it is a good thing that he was able to find so little harmony of economic theory in this country. We used to have lots of it, but it was the harmony of stagnation. We are beyond that. Every man is now thinking sincerely for himself. Let each be true to the light he sees, refuse any man's authority, work for the truth, and we shall have ultimately an economics in this country that will be worth the while.

† Professor W. J. Ashley: I should be extremely sorry if there were an impression that my paper was intended as an attack upon the abstract school. It seemed to me that during the last few years there had been a development of economic teaching in this country which tended to limit economics to an abstract science of a particular character. In our economic journals, in our publications, we have again and again,—as in this paper of Professor Patten's, as in much of the discussion of yesterday,—language used about the economists doing this, that and the other,—with an absolute disregard of the existence of those who hold other views. All that I sought to show was that after all there was another way of looking at things.

Now as to the immediate subject before us, namely, the teaching of economics in the schools,—which has, not altogether fortunately, been mixed up with the subject of economic method. Some people have talked as if everybody would agree with regard to the desirability of teaching “the elementary principles” of political economy. But we are not agreed as to what the elementary principles of economics are. Professor Patten thinks, for example, that the elements of political economy are expressed in his recent paper in the *Annals*. There are many economists here who more or less sympathize with the abstract method of argument, who yet believe that Professor Patten’s whole position is mistaken, who think that the method of teaching children which he advocates is essentially immoral. If a boy, we are told, understood that his interest lay in final utility and not in initial utility, with regard to sharing his apples with other boys, his conduct would be more “generous.” Not in the least. Conduct that is influenced by a feeling of interest is not “generous.”

There has been one considerable experiment made in the popularization of political economy. That was in the 'forties, 'fifties and 'sixties in England, in connection with workingmen’s clubs and institutes. And to it is largely due the utter discredit of political economy among intelligent workingmen in England to-day.

Professor George B. Newcomb : I know it is good pedagogic theory that science, as taught in the public schools, must be not in scientific form ; that the material of the sciences can be furnished and gradual progress made toward the scientific attitude. I suppose the same principles should apply to the moral sciences, and the question of the teaching of economics in the public schools. If there is to be any developed and definite science of

sociology, which aims to correlate the different mental and social sciences and furnish methodary principles for the evolution of life, then it would appear that we should furnish the sort of training that the teacher should have for the teaching of a science of life, an estimate of life, an evaluation of life. This would include enough of the economic way of thinking to make it intelligent on that side, and enough of the ethical habit of thought to give it a broad comprehensive character. I think the general student should be made familiar with the economic concept, the economic logic and method of thought, that is so apt to be absent even in those who have large amounts of history and language. The question should be taken up also in connection with the study of ethics and of civics. The last is a broad title, under which I think the pupils in the high schools ought to be instructed.

Reference has been made here to the fact that our schools are much more than preparatory schools for the colleges, that men are going out to meet these problems of our modern social life who have had no training in the mental and moral sciences. It is a wonderful thing for me to hear men insisting that in a great commercial metropolis the chief thing is for a man to know the physical sciences. These are practical, we are told. But the problems that are practical are those of city government, of business, of finance and banking, of the relations of labor and capital. The people are mixed up with regard to these; they have no practical training on these subjects. There is a grand work for the public schools. You want not written text-books, but living text-books. A practical business man in this city said to me in answer to my question regarding the best way to make a boy ready for his work in life, fit for his business, "I

would have a good intelligent man talk to him from time to time." That is about what I mean with regard to the teacher of these subjects in the schools. He should give the boys something of a philosophy of life, and do it by personal conversation with them. But a man who does that must have a suitable training.

Professor S. N. Patten: I feel very greatly disappointed that the real point at issue in this discussion has not come before the Association. There is a misapprehension of what it is that economics can do in the schools. It is to furnish training in the habit of abstract thought. For illustration, take the matter of temperature. It is continually fluctuating. There is, however, such a thing as an average temperature. This fact we can impress upon the child's mind. A six year old boy can understand that. But it is an abstraction. The boy does not think that there is an ideal thermometer somewhere that stands at the point of average temperature all the year round. In the same way he can understand what is meant by average wages. From these simple things we can develop the proper method of reasoning on abstract questions. When young men arrive at maturity they will have to think on abstract questions. If we have trained them right they will think right.

At the same time, in the group of history and politics, economic history should be taught, but we should not think of these as being in the same field as economics proper. The mistake in this discussion has been the thought that in saying that a certain abstract way of thinking should be taught, I would exclude history. Not at all. Economic history is even not a part of economic theory, but of history; it should go into another group of sciences running parallel to the group of which economics is the highest development. In the group of

physical sciences we cannot teach a man to think properly on economic problems. Nor can it be done by history. History is not a topic which leads up to economics. On the contrary it rather prejudices a person against it. Give that its place, but put in economics also.