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THE DISMAL SCIENCE

AND MR. BURKE

ECONOMICS AS A

CRITICAL THEORY

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One implied audience for an economist speaking on the subject would be other economists.¹ The audience would not be large. The speaker might assume the role of stern humanizer, reminding his colleagues that economics is not chiefly a matter of statistics and equations (though noting by the way that these too are handsome tropes). He would point out that economics is more a matter of trust, words, power, neurosis, and the drama of human relations. He would chide its practitioners for turning such a science away from history, literature, philosophy, and the arts.

It is a puzzle in rhetoric, though, what role to take when speaking to humanists. Surely not that of barbarizer of their humanity. What then? A puzzle. The audience must be indulgent toward the poor solution offered here. No just complaint can be made that a literary, rhetorical, and even Burkean analysis of economics is not done well. As when seeing the dog walking on his hinder legs, one should be surprised to find the trick is done at all.

The main point in fact, and the only surprise, is that the economic dog *can* walk like a human, even on Burkean legs. The dog I have in mind is the breed most popular in the English-speaking world, and of which I am an example: bourgeois, quantitative, splendidly scientific. Other breeds of economist—Marxist, institutionalist, Austrian, Gandhian—also walk about like humans, but few find this surprising, least of all the dogs themselves.

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Bourgeois economists like other scientists, I say, use methods of persuasion common to poets and litterateurs. Not everyone will find this surprising. Some literary intellectuals, Kenneth Burke among them, are so confident of the reach of literary thinking that they react with a shrug: So what else is new? Others are less confident. Even the Frankfurt School, an apparently self-confident bunch, divide critical from scientific thinking on what they believe to be epistemological grounds, the better to leave the science alone. Most moderns divide the world of knowing into literary and scientific thoughts, so that they can leave the other alone.

The scientists, among whom economists properly count themselves, approve of the division. Until recently I believed like most economists that literary and scientific thinking strictly alternate, the one as Burke might say the negative of the other. The scientist is to collect statistics when on duty and read literature only when off. It's assumed without much reflection that he can't be an economic scientist while reading St. Augustine or a literary man while thinking about markets.

The division rules the intellectual world, supported by other divisions said to be similar: objective/subjective, fact/value, hard/soft, male/female. The objective-fact-hard-male side stands armed as science; the subjective-value-soft-female side stands and waits as non-science. And some on the scientific side see a more than orthographic similarity between non-science and nonsense. Bemused by such thoughts the economist is understandably anxious to view economics as a science—imperfect perhaps or immature but a science nonetheless. His self-esteem depends on it. He worries what the physicists will think. But he believes that being a science (and here's the error) excludes being a literary study. Economic science, he reckons, differs from mere saying.

The economist would think it strange to say that the Prince of Saying, the very Kenneth Burke, has much to say about economics. Yet Burke does. Compared with most literary folk Burke is notably economic. More than occasionally he makes remarks about money, markets, economic history, and redemption payments. Though the remarks of an amateur unabsorbed in the professional talk they are often shrewd. He argues in *The Rhetoric of Religion* that empires rise "rationalized by money (which is a language, a kind of purpose-in-the-absolute, a universal wishing well)."² In *A Grammar of Motives* he opines that "we should never expect to see 'feudalism' overthrown by 'capitalism' and 'capitalism' succeeded... but rather should note ele-

ments of all such positions (or 'voices') existing always, but attaining greater clarity of expression or imperiousness of proportion [in] one period than another."³ And the like.

Notably his thought at its center has economic content, and in particular it parallels the "Austrian," libertarian school of economics. A grim thought. In his article on "dramatism" in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, speaking about "human action" distinct from the "mere motion" the tides insensate have, Burke is speaking Austrian.⁴ His terminology is that of Austrian economics, expressing their central idea. In 1949 Ludwig von Mises entitled the manifesto of his school *Human Action*. Listen to page 10:

Human action [Act] is purposeful behavior. Or we may say: Action is will put into operation and transformed into an agency [Agency], is aiming at ends and goals [Purpose], is the ego's [Agent's] meaningful response to stimuli and the conditions of its environment [Scene], is a person's conscious adjustment to the state of the universe that determines his life.⁵

It would not be easy to say whether this was page 10 of von Mises or of Burke. Both discourse on human action; both emphasize the purposefulness of human affairs; both attack the behaviorist hallucination that humans are large rats; and both disparage the loose talk of class action (as against individual action aggregated) in macro-sociology and Marxism: "The resultant of many disparate acts cannot itself be considered an act in the same purposive sense that characterizes each one of such acts (just as the movement of the stock market in its totality is not 'personal' in the sense of the myriad decisions made by each of the variously minded traders)" ("Dramatism"). An economist would attribute such talk unhesitatingly to von Mises or Hayek or an American approximation sui generis such as Frank Knight (with whom Burke shares some features of personality and literary style).

Burke has not read much of these writers and they have not read him.⁶ The discovery of human action was simultaneous but independent, brought about perhaps by similar intellectual scenes and purposes: *ad bellum purificandum*. There is no Burkean influence on scholarship in economics because there was no influence of scholarly economics on Burke. That is not his scene; he is no economic theorist, and it is not from the flashes of amateur brilliance that his way of talking can help the field. It is his profession that can do it, logological talk; and more broadly—perhaps more narrowly—literary-critical talk.

It can help by exposing the rhetoric of economic scientists to critical view. It can help to understand economics and economists in the way it can help to understand poetry and poets.

This will be disappointing. The noneconomist might hope that literary criticism could help understand the *economy*, not just the locutions of people who study it. After all, he would say, economics is notoriously narrow in its understanding of the human condition. Surely here is an opportunity to get rid of that great stick of a character Homo Economicus and replace him with somebody real, like Madame Bovary.

It may be. But as Our Lord once put it, "It's more complicated than that." True enough, the understanding of individual motivation in economics could use some complicating. The economist has from time to time inquired at the psychology shop for premises of behavior more complex than simple greed. He has seldom found any to his liking. The experimental psychologists have stick figures of their own for sale, and few enough buyers.⁸ It would seem reasonable for the economist to inquire instead at the English or the communication or the speech shops. He might get them to sell a few behavioral assumptions on the sly, as for a while now they have been selling philosophy interdicted by the departments of philosophy.

To repeat: it may be. The places where literature and economics overlap are not much explored.⁹ One can think of possibilities, though they are not convincing to an economist and can't be made convincing without more inquiry.

Here's one instance. Both economists and literary critics talk about "preferences." Economists mean by this simply "what people want," in the sense of wanting some candy when the price is right. Albert Hirschman and a few other economists have recently observed that stopping at mere wants causes economics to overlook higher-level preferences, wants about wants.¹⁰ Elsewhere these are known as taste, morality, or, west of the Sierras, life-style. Hirschman's notion is that if you wish to be the sort of person who enjoys Shakespeare you will sit through a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as part of your education. You impose a set of preferences on yourself, which you then indulge in the usual way. You have preferences about preferences: metapreferences.¹¹

It would not be shocking if literary critics could teach economists a thing or two about metapreferences. Literary criticism after all is largely a discourse about them, and people like I. A. Richards, Northrop Frye, Wayne Booth, and Kenneth Burke are fair canny. One might think that the older line of critics—Sydney, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold—would have in fact the most to teach, being more concerned

than the recent kind with matters of value (matters of how well, as against simply how). But a passage from the younger line can illustrate how literary notions might be used to understand the economy of taste. Richards wrote in 1925:

On a pleasure theory of value [that is to say, a theory using only preferences, not metapreferences] there might well be doubt [that good poetry is better than bad], since those who do enjoy it [namely, bad poetry, such as that collected in *Poems of Passion*] certainly appear to enjoy it in a high degree. But on the theory here maintained, the fact that those who have passed through the stage of enjoying the *Poems of Passion* to that of enjoying the bulk of the *Golden Treasury*, for example, do not return, settles the matter. . . . Actual universal preference on the part of those who have tried both kinds fairly is the same (on our view) as superiority in value of the one over the other.¹²

Economists will notice right away that the Richards test is similar to that of the philosopher John Rawls, a test of political constitutions from behind a hypothetical veil of prenatal ignorance; they will notice that it is similar to the tests of social preferences proposed earlier by Harsanyi, Sen, and others, tests which are extensions of expected utility. In a world of certainty they will notice that Richards' argument is the same as the economics of "revealed preference" or on a national level the "Hicks-Kaldor test of welfare improvements." In the jargon of economics a bundle of groceries is "revealed preferred" to another if you *could* buy either bundle (could *afford* to buy either) but in fact chose one of them. In your view evidently the bundle you could afford but did not take must be inferior.

The point is that Richards' test is a revealed preference test for (good) taste. In other words it is a way of ranking metapreferences. You could have read the classic comic book but in fact chose to read Dostoevski because you wanted to be that sort of person. The Dostoevski-reading personage is revealed preferred by you. That someone who has passed through the stage of enjoying "The Love Boat" on television to that of enjoying the bulk of modern drama does not return will settle the matter. That someone who has passed through the stage of enjoying modern drama to that of enjoying the bulk of Shakespeare does not return will settle it again: Shakespeare is metapreferred to modern drama, metapreferred in turn to "The Love Boat."

The same applies to nonliterary preferences, which is why Richards' notion can be used by economists. To be sure: it's more complicated than that. We do drift slowly from one metapreference to another and

sometimes, gyre-like, return to elementary pleasures. But the notion is a good beginning. People who learn French cooking may never return to German. The style of life in Andover, New Jersey—that is, the preferences one chooses to indulge—may be revealed preferred to those in Pittsburgh or New York. It would be so revealed if one observed people with a choice trekking from Pittsburgh to New York and thence to Andover but never back again. In like fashion a capitalist democracy may be revealed preferred to a workers' democratic republic by the direction in which the guns on the border point.¹³

What is attractive about the test is that it replies to an argument you hear a lot from economists and other people living after virtue, that "you can't say anything about tastes." Because it lies deep in the culture, a way of preventing religious wars and of keeping ethics out of life, you hear it even from sophomores. They say in effect *de gustibus non est disputandum*, as did literally the economists Gary Becker and George Stigler.¹⁴ To this our man Hirschman answers: *de valoribus disputandum est*.¹⁵ Hirschman's brave counterassertion requires some test, some argument to give it persuasive weight. The Richards test will do.

The Richards test, in short, is literary criticism but it is also economics. Even by an economist's narrow standard of sayability there is nothing intrinsically can't-sayable about changes in preferences guided by taste. Or at any rate it is no more can't-sayable than ordinary remarks about ordinary choice, the heart of economic theory.

Literature and its criticism, then, might help to understand the economy. It might help understand the development of taste or the motivation of entrepreneurs or the formation of expectations. Fine. But its main use, I say, is not to understand the economy but to understand the talk by economists about the economy. The talk has become sickly. Understanding it better would be a good thing, like the understanding of one's neuroses that comes from Freud or of one's alienation that comes from Marx. Looking at economics with a literary eye will make economists more self-conscious about their rhetoric. A good and healthy thing.

The scientific paper is a literary genre. I have argued the point in "The Problem of Audience in Historical Economics," which uses a suggestive essay by Charles Bazerman, "What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse."¹⁶ A scientific paper like a poem or an oration depends for its effect on such things as metaphors, analogies, introspections, appeals to character, and appeals to authority. Of course it depends also on experiments, mathematics, and statistics. But even these, I say, reduce again to metaphor. Even in a cheap sense the scientist's argument rests commonly on rhetoric, as when the statistician acquires persuasiveness from the common

meanings of his technical words, such as "unbiasedness," "efficiency," "robustness," and "significance" (William Kruskal, a statistician of note, argues this in "Formulas, Numbers, Words").¹⁷ And in the ancient and honorable sense of "rhetoric," after all, a piece of scientific writing is above all meant to persuade.

In the terminology invented by J. L. Austin and John Searle the assertions of an economic scientist are not mere utterances (about which only phonology can speak) or mere propositions (about which only formal logic can speak). They are speech acts or, as they say, "illocutionary acts": attempts to persuade. As Burke would put it (and did put it before Austin and Searle), they are acts by the economist-agent in a scene of scientific conversation through the agency of master tropes and their servants for the purposes of influencing public policy or achieving eminence in the scholarly world or even on occasion satisfying a curiosity about economic events.

The point can be illustrated by any important phrase from economic literature. Take for instance "The demand curve slopes down." This conventional line of economic poetry, much used in epic and containing within it a metaphor wrapped in mathematics, means that when the price of something rises the consumers will buy less of it. When the price of oil rises the quantity of heating oil or gasoline demanded falls. People turn down their thermostats and wear sweaters indoors. They take fewer vacation trips and buy smaller cars.

The price does it, which is what makes the phrase important as social law, the Law of Demand. Laymen look on prices as extortions with no redeeming social value; economists look on them as inducements to human action. Like a law that things with mass attract, the Law of Demand is not surprising by itself, though surprising enough in its practical uses. Furthermore, economists believe it when other people do not, as they believe in the goodness of free trade and the efficacy of competition. Belief in the Law of Demand holds together the speech community of economics.

The question is how economists persuade themselves of its truth. How do they know that when the price of gasoline goes up the quantity of gasoline demanded will go down?

The ways they persuade themselves turn out to be mostly common topics, argument such as one might see in "Areopagitica" or "A Modest Proposal." Yet economists believe they believe by virtue of special topics in Economic Science:

- After a good deal of handwringing and computer squeezing certain very sophisticated statistical tests of the Law applied to entire economies, tests in which every allowance has been

made for bias and incompleteness, have sometimes resulted in the diagonal elements of certain matrices being negative at the 5 percent level of significance. The jargon for this special topic is "a fully identified complete system of demand equations." Even its inventors, such as Hans Theil, have no great confidence in the result. A shift of one metaphor here, a shift of one appeal to authority there, and the "proof" would be valid no longer.

- Less ambitious but more numerous demonstrations of the law have been attempted market-by-market. Agricultural economists especially have for fifty years been fitting demand curves to statistics on corn and hogs. Again the curves sometimes give the right slope and sometimes don't. In any case the thought before calculation that forces the right slope—known as "specification"—contains elements of introspection, analogy, and other common sense embarrassing to the claims of mindless objectivity. Econometricians have begun to take heed.¹⁸ But they need help in their rhetoric before calculation.
- Some economists have tried recently to subject the Law to a few experimental tests. After a good deal of throat clearing they have found it to be true for rats and false for humans, an interesting result which no one believes. As Harry Collins has recently argued, an experiment uses debate rather than ends it.¹⁹

These three arguments are properly scientific, although only the third quite matches the received view of scientific method (philosophically obsolete and historically misleading though it is). The received arguments yield mixed results. Does this leave economists uncertain about the Law of Demand? Not at all. They believe it ardently. Only part of their ardor therefore can be properly scientific. The part is small: few economists would assign a weight of more than, say, 15 percent to the statistical and experimental evidence.

The other 85 percent is patently literary:

- Introspection is an important source of belief. The economic scientist asks himself, "What would I do if the price of gasoline doubled?" If properly socialized in economics he will answer, "I would consume less." In similar fashion a poet might ask herself what she might do if she saw heather or a wave; a textual critic might ask himself how he would react to a line if "quod, o patrona virgo" were emended to "quidem est, patroni et ergo."
- Thought experiments (common in physics) are persuasive too. The economic scientist asks in view of his experience of life and his knowledge of economics what other people would do if the

price of gasoline doubled. In the same way, a novelist might ask how Huck would respond to Jim's request to come up on the raft; or a critic might ask how an audience would react to the sacrifice of Coriolanus.

- Cases in point, though not controlled experiments or large samples, persuade to some degree. The biggest recent triumph for the Law of Demand was the Oil Embargo of 1973-74: the doubling of gasoline prices caused gasoline consumption to decline, although noneconomists predicted it would not. This is narrative, not statistical, fit (although statisticians are moving toward a rhetoric that a literary person would recognize as narrative).²⁰ The narrative tells. In the same way, Wayne Booth remarks, "The most sensitive book-length theological account we can imagine. . . lacks something that men know together when in answer to the question, 'What is the life of man?' they answer, 'There was once in Bethlehem. . .'"²¹
- The lore of the marketplace persuades. Businesspeople believe that the Law of Demand is true, for they cut prices when they wish to raise the quantity demanded. They have the incentive of their livelihood to know rightly. What mere professor would dispute such testimony? Disputing it would contradict a fundamental conviction among professors of economics (and among professors of ecology and evolutionary biology too) that opportunities for profit are not usually left lying around untaken. The argument is ad hominem, an argument from the character of its audience. In the same way a literary critic might try, un-Burke-like, to defend the authority of the author—who after all has an incentive to know what he means—against the claims of the playful reader making a text out of "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."
- The lore of the academy also persuades. If many wise economists have long affirmed the Law of Demand, what mere late-comer would dispute their testimony? Any science operates this way, standing on the shoulders of giants. The argument from authority is not of course decisive. But it must be given weight. Scholarship could not make progress if all questions were reopened every fifteen years. In the same way Keats followed the tradition of pastoral as preparation for epic; and the New Criticism worked away in its tradition undisturbed by Burkeish thoughts of audience and speaker.
- Commonly the symmetry of the Law will persuade: as Burke remarked in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "yielding to the form prepares assent to the matter identified with it."²² If there is a Law

of Supply—there are many reasons to think so—it is hard to resist the symmetrical attractions of a Law of Demand. At higher levels of mathematical science the appeal to symmetry accounts for a higher percentage of the persuasion. In the same way the critic will search for structure in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and find it in the symmetry of beautiful act and truthful scene.

- Mere definition is a powerful argument, and again the more powerful the more mathematical the talk. A higher price of gasoline leaves less income to be spent on all things, including gasoline (at least by one definition of income or of the Law). In the same way the critic can define the elements of discourse dramatically, leaving less for other metaphors.
- Above all, analogy persuades. That the Law of Demand is persuasive for ice cream and movies, which no one would want to deny, makes it more persuasive also for gasoline. Analogy gives the Law its majesty. The Law is persuasive for ice cream and movies, of course, but by analogy is also persuasive for gasoline, for food, for housing, for status, for power, for love. Analogy rules the scientific world as it does the literary world: bird thou never wert.

These are eleven good reasons for believing the Law of Demand. Three of them look “scientific,” though at bottom they too are metaphorical—mathematics being the noblest metaphor of them all. The rest are “literary,” which is to say that they use tropes of the language-using animal that might appear in any memorable speech. Economic argument, being language and symbolic action, is accessible to literary criticism.

It is not the failure of economics to be really and truly scientific that accounts for its verbiage. The point is the opposite one: all science, including economics, is verbal because it is human, tropal because it is artful, rhetorical because it has after all an honest purpose to persuade.

A good example of the rhetoric of successful science in economics is a famous paper written in 1957 by Robert M. Solow, “Technical Change and the Aggregate Production Function.” Solow was trying to understand the rising income of Americans from 1909 to 1949. He wished to know in particular how much was caused by more machinery, buildings, and other physical “capital” and how much by other things—chiefly the increasing ingenuity of people. He began:

In this day of rationally designed econometric studies and super input-output tables, it takes something more than the usual “willing suspension of disbelief” to talk seriously of the

aggregate production function. . . . The new wrinkle I want to describe is an elementary way of segregating variations in output per head due to technical change from those due to the availability of capital per head. . . . Either this kind of aggregate economics appeals or it doesn't. Personally I belong to both schools. . . . It is convenient to begin with the special case of *neutral* technical change. . . . In that case the production function takes the special form $Q = A(t) f(K, L)$ and the multiplicative factor $A(t)$ measures the cumulated effect of shifts over time.²³

The four master tropes which Burke and others detect in literature are here at work: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. The argument depends at once on a metaphor. The “aggregate production function” which Solow diffidently introduces asserts that the making of our daily bread is like a mathematical function. The jumble of responsibility, habit, conflict, ambition, intrigue, and ceremony that is our working life is supposed to be similar to a chalked curve on a blackboard. Economists are habituated to such figures of speech to the point of not recognizing that they are, but noneconomists will agree that this one is bold. No wonder that like any drama of human relations it requires willing suspension of disbelief.

The L and K in the equation are metonymies. The L reduces the human attentiveness in making bread to mere hours of work. The hour is an emblem, no more the substance of the matter than the heart is of emotions or a bottle is of the wine. The K reduces the material inheritance of the workplace to a pile of shmoo. Solow is aware of the boldness of this figure too, though defending it as conventional: he “would not try to justify what follows by calling on fancy theorems on aggregation and index numbers,” referring in a footnote to Joan Robinson's exploration of “the profound difficulties that stand in the way of giving any precise meaning to the quantity of capital.”²⁴

The identification of $A(t)$ with “technical change” is a synecdoche, and on it the paper turns. The notation says that the multiplier A depends on time, rising as the technologists get smarter. But Solow admits that “slowdowns, speedups, improvements in the education of the labor force, and all sorts of things” will also cause it to rise. Critics of the calculation such as Evsey Domar, Theodore Schultz, and Solow himself, have called it a mere “measure of our ignorance.” Calling it “technical change” as Solow does apologetically (though persistently) is a bold synecdoche indeed, taking part for the whole and running with it.

Solow runs with it into a paragraph containing a little freshman calculus and a clever exploitation of the conventions of the economists'

conversation. By the second page of the article he has made his main point and has persuaded most of the economists listening. He persuades them with the symmetry of the mathematics and the appeal to the authority of scientific traditions in economics, and with the perspectival tropes: metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche.

Especially he persuades them with irony, the "perspective of perspectives" (GM, p. 512). Observe his ironical bow to "rationally designed econometric studies" (he knew as did part of his audience that the rationality was in doubt, though in 1957 the econometricians were humorlessly unaware). He describes his notion as a mere "wrinkle" and as "elementary," so elementary a wrinkle that no one had thought of it before and that after Solow an intellectual industry arose to exploit it.²⁵ He protects himself from criticism by mocking the sober-sides: "Personally I belong to both schools." The synecdoche of "technical change" is protected by ironical quotation marks when in doubt, though the marks fall away as doubt fades.

Irony is the most sophisticated of the master tropes. As Hayden White put it:

It presupposes that the reader or auditor already knows, or is capable of recognizing, the absurdity of the characterization of the thing designated in the Metaphor, Metonymy, or Synecdoche used to give form to it. . . . Irony is in one sense metatropological, for it is deployed in the self-conscious awareness of the possible misuse of figurative language. . . . Irony thus represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematical nature of language itself has become recognized. It points to the potential foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdity of the beliefs it parodies. It is therefore "dialectical," as Kenneth Burke has noted.²⁶

The most sophisticated economists and the most sophisticated novelists favor irony. Irony presupposes an existing conversation off of which one can score; in this and in other ways it is mature. The economist George Stigler wrote as follows about the guiding metaphor of why people purchase things: "It would be of course bizarre to look upon the typical family—that complex mixture of love, convenience, and frustration—as a business enterprise. Therefore, economists have devoted much skill and ingenuity to elaborating this approach."²⁷ The jest protects and persuades.

The point could be pushed further. It is that the master tropes beloved of Burke illuminate pieces of economic science as much as they

do Rousseau's notion of the general will or Falstaff's character.²⁸ Literary criticism of a Burkean (or Richardsian, Fryean, Boothian, Fishian, Hartmanian, or Hirschian) kind is able to make clear the workings of the texts of economists as much as the texts of poets.

It is possible to go at least one step further along this curious path. I have said so far that economic theory can be enriched by literary criticism and especially that literary criticism can be used to criticize the writings of economists. The further step is to note that economic theory is itself a species of criticism. In other words, like Marxism and psychoanalysis, bourgeois economics of the school of Adam Smith is literally a critical theory. It was the first: Marxism was a conscious reaction to all its doctrines, and psychoanalysis was an unconscious reaction to its doctrine of conscious rationality.

A critical theory, to use as a checklist Raymond Geuss's synthesis in *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, is "a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation."²⁹ The false consciousness of a person lacking the theory is spoken of in medical terms, as a "delusion" from which the patient "suffers."³⁰ The neurosis is cured and the alienation overcome by self-consciousness and the liberation it brings. Likewise, I am saying, bourgeois economics.

"Critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment." This purpose was foremost in Adam Smith's mind. Smith's emancipating theory was no small contributor to the literal emancipation of the slaves in the British Empire. And of course his thinking has ever since been the foundation of one kind of anarchist politics, unpopularly antistatist in a statist world. (That Smith's thinking has occasionally been adopted by state gangsters is no more or less relevant than that Marx's has). Bourgeois economics can assert as well as can Marxism and psychoanalysis that it aims at emancipation and enlightenment. One might even argue that in actually hitting the target it has performed better.

"Critical theories . . . are claimed to be 'reflective' or 'self-referential': a critical theory is itself always a part of the object-domain which it describes; critical theories are always in part about themselves."³¹ This is more true of economics than it is of the others, as economists have recently begun to realize. What they have realized is that there are sharp limits imposed by economics on the ability of economists to engage in that prediction and control alleged to characterize science. The limit is the American Question: If you're so smart why ain't you rich? Economists mostly are not rich. An economist who pretends to know what will happen to the economy next year, the better to advise the prince, is claiming knowledge that can make

him rich. If he knew that bond prices were going to rise next year he could invest and prosper. In fact he would have done so already; and he would surely not be telling anyone else until the information was exhausted. To imagine that tip sheets give valuable advice on bonds is no more sensible than to imagine they give it on thoroughbreds. It is an economic principle: opportunities for profit, to repeat, are not left lying around untaken. Anyone who was so smart would be quietly rich. More self-referential you cannot get.

"Critical theories are cognitively acceptable only if they survive confirmation through observation and experiment." I have mentioned the degree to which the Frankfurt School falls for the dichotomous maneuvers of its positivist enemies. The economic arguments discussed above suggest that economics falls on the nonscience side of the dichotomy, along with the other critical theories.

So it goes: if Marxism is a critical theory so also is economics. The argument will irritate Marxists (and non-Marxists too, I suppose). It removes the left lean from the idea of a critical theory: American economics, I need not emphasize, is considered "right wing" (though oddly so: no one who wants to abolish import tariffs and syndicalist monopolies outright, as most economists in the United States do, can be called exactly a "conservative," and certainly not a "fascist"). But if the idea of a critical theory is to amount to anything more than a periphrastic conjugation of Marxism it should be able to absorb this bourgeois and "right-wing" economics. In the end the idea of a critical theory should be able to absorb the idea of rhetorical criticism, as propounded by Kenneth Burke. Or maybe it will be absorbed by it. When all is said and done, rhetoric looks like the master critical theory, a sweetly American one, shorn of the fallacious economic history and antique neuroses haunting European Marxism.

No wonder, then, that rhetoric has flourished in America. And no wonder that it can be used to deconstruct and maybe reconstruct that American (and formerly Scottish) invention, the bourgeois, English-speaking science of economics. The dog walks, and dances with tears in his eyes, to a tune by Kenneth Burke.

NOTES

1. Certain passages from the following have appeared in a different form in "The Literary Character of Economics," *Daedalus* (Summer 1984), 97-120, and in *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and its program in Humanities, Science, and Technology for support during the writing.

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2. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 275.

3. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 513.

4. Kenneth Burke, "Dramatism" in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

5. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 10.

6. On Frank Knight see *GM*, pp. 256-57.

7. *RR*, p. 277 and numerous times thereafter.

8. Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy* (1976) and Ronald Heiner, "The Origin of Predictable Behavior," *American Economic Review*, 73 (1983), 560-90. Compare the Lord's stricture on "a constant procession of solemn, humorless caricatures... [from] various oversimplified schemes that reduce human motives to a few... itches"; or Satan asking whether one must "shop around among the various caricatures" (*RR*, pp. 299-300).

9. A pioneer from the literary side is Kurt Heinzelmann, whose *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) discusses at length how economic theory in the nineteenth century used language and how it in turn influenced the language of imaginative writers. Marc Shell has catalogued the use of (strictly) monetary metaphors in literature in *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

10. Albert Hirschman, "Against Parsimony: Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse," *American Economic Review*, 74 (1984), 89.

11. Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979).

12. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925; rpt. New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, n.d.), pp. 205-6.

13. Milton Friedman is recognized as a skilled orator, a *vir dicendi peritus* (the knowledgeable add the *bonus*). He uses the trope in question to support his argument against conscription in peacetime: "I have observed many persons initially in favor of the draft change their opinions as they have looked into the arguments and studied the evidence; I have never observed anyone who was initially in favor of a volunteer force reverse his position on the basis of further study. This greatly enhances my confidence in the validity of the position I have taken." See Friedman, *An Economist's Protest*, 2d ed. (Glen Ridge, N.J.: Thomas Horton and Daughters, 1975), p. 188.

14. Gary Becker and George Stigler, "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum," *American Economic Review*, 67 (1977), 76-90.

15. To which might come the reply, "Delenda est valor." See Hirschman, "Against Parsimony," p. 90.

16. Donald McCloskey, "The Problem of Audience in Historical Econom-

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- ics: Rhetorical Thoughts on a Text by Robert Fogel," *History and Theory*, 24 (1985), 1-22; and Charles Bazerman, "What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 11 (1981), 361-86.
17. William Kruskal, "Formulas, Numbers, Words: Statistics in Prose," *American Scholar*, 47 (1978), 223-29.
18. T. F. Cooley and S. F. Leroy, "Identification and the Estimation of Money Demand," *American Economic Review*, 71 (1981), 825-44; Edward Leamer, *Specification Searches: Ad Hoc Inferences with Non-Experimental Data* (New York: Wiley, 1978) and "Let's Take the Con Out of Econometrics," *American Economics Review*, 73 (1983), 31-43.
19. Harry M. Collins, *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice* (London: Sage, 1985).
20. Fredrick Mosteller and John W. Tukey, *Data Analysis and Regression: A Second Course in Statistics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1977). See also Leamer, *Specification Searches*.
21. Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 74.
22. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 58.
23. Robert Solow, "Technical Change and the Aggregate Production Function," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 39 (1957), 349-50.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
25. Literally speaking it *had* been thought of before, by G. T. Jones in *Increasing Returns* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933). Solow did not know about Jones, an economic historian, though he was aware of several attempts in the 1950s by historically oriented economists such as Valavanis-Vail, Schmookler, and Abramovitz to measure the same thing. The others were less influential because they did not use the metaphor of the production function as explicitly as Solow did.
26. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 37.
27. George Stigler, *The Theory of Price*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 21.
28. Hearing at the conference Michael Leff's essay reprinted in this volume sharpened my understanding here.
29. Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), p. 2.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 55.