

TEACHING

Alexander Gerschenkron

DONALD McCLOSKEY

We must have had teachers who made us teachers. In my own case from the sixth grade to my first teaching job those teachers were (I write them out in a verse) Stanton, Melcher, Brisbois, Gustafson, Meyer, Gerschenkron, Temin, and Fogel. Alexander Gerschenkron was not the best teacher or the best economist or the best historian among these—nor even, I think, the best human being. But he was the best scholar I have known.

Gerschenkron was an economic historian and a comparativist, writing on the European past and the Soviet present. He taught from 1948 to 1975 in the department of economics at Harvard, producing, if that is quite the word, scores of graduate students and writing a moderate number of books. He made an impression. Students and colleagues lived in awe of him, and not only because they were merely economists while he was everything, a polymath ranging over statistics and Greek poetry and a great deal in between. Other people who know everything—the Bernard Lewises and the Albert Hirschmans of the scholarly world—tell stories about Gerschenkron's erudition and wit as though even they, too, were impressed.

He was born in Odessa in 1904 (we think, for, like his friend the economic historian of the Middle Ages M. M. Postan, a fellow Russian resident among the gullible Westerners, Gerschenkron liked to make up stories about his life). His family fled the civil war in 1920 to the comparative calm of Austria, where he received a *gymnasium* education, adding

Latin, Greek, French, and German to his Russian.

Later he acquired languages with astonishing ease—Swedish one week, Bulgarian the next. The story circulated that he needed Portuguese for some minor purpose, and, knowing all the other Romance tongues, found mastering Portuguese grammar the job of an afternoon. Reading a stack of easy Portuguese that evening, he at first found the going tough, but gradually easier. Suddenly it clicked, and he was reading fluently. Several minutes into this triumph, however, he noticed that the text he had picked up was not Portuguese but English. He had not detected the change in language.

The only language of scholarship he appears not to have known is Hebrew. He was strangely coy about whether or not he was Jewish, which we all assumed he was. A classmate of mine used to try out Yiddishisms on him, making appointments to see him in his office for this purpose, hoping to trap him in a knowing smile, but he got nowhere.

Gerschenkron studied economics and politics at the University of Vienna, managed a motorcycle firm for a few years, and worked during the 1930s as an economist in Viennese research institutes. The *Anschluss* drove him to the United States, a double refugee in the intellectual migration (he told a story about coming across Switzerland on the passport of a St. Bernard dog, but no one believed this). During the 1940s, like many of the migrants, he moved from job to job, teaching at Berkeley (where he claimed to have helped build Liberty ships after hours for the war effort) and working on the staff of the Federal Reserve Board from 1944 on. It was hard for American academic life, stuffy and second-rate as it generally was then, to absorb these

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astonishing people from *Mitteleuropa*. I do not know what possessed the Harvard faculty of economics in 1948, well-known at the time for its anti-Semitism, to hire Gerschenkron as the replacement for Adam Payson Usher. Perhaps he impressed them, too.

Beyond his early work in measuring Soviet industrial output, his main scholarly contribution was a "theory of relative backwardness," which gave an account of the differing ways that European countries industrialized. He first formulated the theory in 1952, at age forty-eight, and then tested and elaborated it for the rest of his life. He argued that a country such as Russia, backward relative to Britain when it embarked on industrialization, did not go through the same stages. It leapt over them, using the state as a substitute for the missing prerequisites of economic growth. Growth was force-fed in Russia, and to a lesser extent in Germany, with consequences for the character of the places. Russia grew with giant enterprises instead of small firms, centralized control instead of competitive markets, an overbearing military-industrial complex instead of peace-loving capitalists.

I first met Gerschenkron in the fall of 1964, when he was sixty and eminent for these thoughts, in the first week of my graduate education. He was teaching his year-long course on European economic history required of all the would-be economists. Harvard had, to my relief, just gotten rid of the language requirement for the Ph.D. in economics (you were allowed to substitute mathematics and statistics); it had shortly before gotten rid of the requirement that economists learn the history of their discipline; and later, in Harvard's final contribution to breadth in economic education, it got rid of the requirement in economic history, the study of which Henry Rosovsky has described as "virtually the only course in the graduate economics curriculum that directly assaulted the provincialism of most students." But until Gerschenkron retired you had to take a full year of him, writing two long papers applying economics to some event in European economic history and suffering an assault from a most unprovincial man.

In 1964, as it happened, Gerschenkron puzzled us for a few weeks with the theory of index numbers, his great formal love in economics, and then fell ill before getting to any economic history. A bad heart plagued him

throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and this was another long episode. One of them—not this one, I think—was brought on by a heroic sprint he made along the platform of the subway at Harvard Square to stop a despondent Soviet visitor from throwing himself under the wheels of the train. When I first encountered Alexander Gerschenkron, he was slight of build, thinned down, I was told, from a pre-heart attack plumpness. His office was littered with bottles of brandy, a glass of which he offered to all comers. The brandy was supposed to be for his heart, you see, although Rosovsky remembers it from before the heart trouble. Again, one never knew.

One never knew much with Gerschenkron. William Parker of Yale, another distinguished economic historian, fleetingly Gerschenkron's student, has complained of the master's skill at keeping everyone around him off balance. Paul David of Stanford, also distinguished and also his student, describes Gerschenkron discovering one day that this particular student was not a morning person; henceforth all their meetings were scheduled for 6:00 A.M. at the Faculty Club.

He was on sick leave the entire 1964-65 academic year, and I therefore was not taught economic history by the man in a classroom. Barry Supple, a young Englishman then at the business school across the river, and Albert Imlah, of Tufts University, filled in for Gerschenkron that year. We were given the Gerschenkron reading list and papers, though—the papers being the only opportunity for creativity in a mind-stunning program of mainly useless formalisms (economics has not changed since then), and the subject fascinated me.

So did Alexander Gerschenkron, from a distance. My father was a colleague (in political science) and, like all the faculty, was filled with admiration for Gerschenkron. They were friends, in the non-intimate way that two such people could be friends, exchanging learned witticisms and sporting news over the lunch table. I have my father's copy of Gerschenkron's most famous book, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (1962), inscribed "To Bob, this small offering to Aesculapius with warmest personal regards and all good wishes, Alex, January 1963," when my father was in the hospital after a botched appendicitis operation. The classical reference was characteristic and the Socratic echo appropriate, too.

It was from my father about then that I first heard the Ted Williams story. Gerschenkron, who was a serious student of baseball and basketball—it was part of his commitment to his new nation—claimed to know Ted Williams, the retired star of his beloved Boston Red Sox. “Williams, you know,” he would say, “is no boob. In fact, he’s quite well read, and has a special interest in economics and economic history. But he expresses himself, naturally, in baseball terms.” Oh, is that so? What does he think about Ken Galbraith? “He says about Galbraith: ‘He hits very high flies to very short left field.’” What about Walt Whitman Rostow? [This was before Rostow’s adventures in the Johnson administration, and therefore the joke was merely scholarly.] “Ted says, ‘Rostow hits a home run every time he steps up to the plate. But he forgets to touch the bases as he runs it out.’” Here was a scholar. The next academic year I signed up for his seminar.

There began a run of three years in which I learned my trade. To say that Gerschenkron “taught” it to me would be too Anglo-Saxon and direct. The Latin is better: I was educated, drawn out. Gerschenkron never spoke during the main business of the seminar, but sat puffing his pipe (a substitute for cigarettes) and watching one graduate student teach another. I recognize now that he had a brilliant sense of ceremony and honor. He always scheduled his seminar in the evenings, once a week, and arranged for proper seminar rooms, never classrooms, which gave the seminar a dignity hard to achieve between 10:30 and 11:50 A.M., TuTh in PHBA 213. He played the judge listening to the attorneys in the well. No other faculty members were allowed to attend, except his own student Peter McClelland, an assistant professor until he moved on to Cornell. A paper would be presented, distributed in advance, and criticized by the other students.

Gerschenkron’s only direct contribution would be a Delphic comment at the end, before closing the proceedings. Often it would be evaluative, and one would ache for a hint of approval. Approval was never more than a hint, to preserve the scarcity value. A particularly unimaginative paper on subject X, which had been utterly demolished by the junior devils, evoked only the summarizing remark, formed of gentle irony, “Well, we certainly know more about subject X than we did two hours ago.”

Honor, he understood, is crucial for intellectual work. People do not go to graduate school, even in economics in the boom time of the late 1960s, to make money. They go and stay for honor. I have tried to persuade university administrators that honor is a good substitute for cash in bad times, but they are obsessed with budget cuts and the *numerus clausus* for registered races and cannot hear. Gerschenkron gave out honors as though they mattered. An A in his course was something special, based wholly on one’s performance on the big paper. He often did not get around to reading the final exams, which irritated the students but made pedagogic sense. The point of graduate school is scholarship, not quiz mastering. The interviews in his office were made into little ceremonies. Conversations in the hallway were made to tell. He gave fellowships from a Rockefeller grant that he got when he realized that a new economic history, more analytic than the old, was coming into being, and he gave out the fellowships with gravity suiting the honor.

He scrounged some office space for us, the honored economic historians, in the attic of the old *Daedalus* building on Linden Street. We were to have a “workshop.” The word *workshop* was a Gerschenkron favorite. The work of scholarship was similar to the work done in a motorcycle repair shop—the “bench science” of a laboratory, as the chemists and biologists call it. In a preface to the book of his student Albert Fishlow he praised “the statistical appendixes in which the author offers a full insight into his laboratory and without which no real appreciation of the importance of the study and of the validity of its interpretative results is possible.” It was an honor to labor in the “workshop.” He would have been appalled by our ignorant motto, characteristic of young economists, which we hung over the door (he never came up: more *laissez faire*): “Give us the data and we will finish the job.”

What Gerschenkron understood about teaching graduate students that most of us do not is how important their tribes are for their education. He did not wish to be our friend; he was willing to be our totem, our untouchable king, a remote if sardonically amused father from whom honor derives. The Baker Report a decade ago from the University of Chicago made this point about the later years of graduate school, stressing that graduate students need an honorable social life con-

nected to their intellectual life; but again no one has listened.

One can justify in such terms a practice that will seem unjustifiable otherwise. Gerschenkron "supervised" dissertations with a notably light hand. In my case, which was not unusual, we had in four or five years from start to finish many chats, much sparring about the defenestration of Ulm (a favorite topic for exhibiting erudition) or the merits of an English as against a Latinate vocabulary or the chances this season for the Celtics, but exactly one discussion about my dissertation, and that desultory. In this he was practicing a theory of graduate teaching, not merely avoiding students. On the contrary, he interviewed every one of the fifty students in his graduate class each term for the papers. Unlike many economists, he was not always rushing about advising governments or giving seminars (I never got him to come out to Chicago to give a paper, for example) and was available for talk. But he would not let you whine about your work and get detailed instructions from the master. I later learned that some professors have the opposite theory, that a graduate student should be led in detail. This results in the giving of many degrees and the production of much normal science; but whether it results in creative scholars is not so clear.

He taught by example, but at home, not on the lecture circuit. Waiting in Gerschenkron's astonishingly chaotic office for an interview one day, I received from the nearest of numerous stacks of books and magazines a lesson in the scholarly life, the sort of lesson that professors forget they give. The stack contained a book of plays in Latin, a book on non-Euclidean geometry, a book of chess problems, numerous statistical tomes, journals of literature and science, several historical works in various languages, and, at the bottom of it all, two-feet deep, a well-worn copy of *MAD* magazine.

Ceremony was the key to such a mythologized theory of teaching, as when his graduate students were invited up to his dacha in New Hampshire for an annual meal, filled with ironic ceremonies. There was, for one thing, the ceremony of the ride up, if one went in his car. He drove like a madman, at Italian speed but without Italian skill. One time the car broke down, and I went out and fiddled with the carburetor, fixing it. Gerschenkron ever after touted my mechanical skill (of which I

had none) by contrast with his Continental ignorance of the internal combustion engine. Come to think of it, the pose was odd in view of his stint selling motorcycles. Probably it was one of his little jokes.

The compulsory croquet game at the dacha was certainly a joke. The students and spouses would participate, but Gerschenkron always won because he cheated. He would make up house rules of great ingenuity to his own advantage. If, nonetheless, there was a chance of him losing, he would adjourn the game, for it was suddenly time for drinks indoors. The dinners in New Hampshire were occasions to meet his wife, who did not have the cheerful disposition of her husband but had some of the same learning. They wrote an article together on translations of Shakespeare, which was published in a literary journal. Gerschenkron delighted in publishing in literary journals—it was claimed, not impossibly, but I take it falsely, that when Roman Jakobson retired in 1960 from his chair in Slavic literature at Harvard, Gerschenkron was offered it.

If honor was important for maintaining scholarly standards among students and colleagues, then dishonor had to have a place, too. Gerschenkron could be harshly evaluative, in a way that makes Americans wince. He wrote a devastating review of a translation from Russian of a book in economics, attacking in detail the author's apparently feeble command of the language. The translator had the temerity to approach Gerschenkron at a conference and say amiably, "I want you to know, Professor Gerschenkron, that I am not angry about your review." Gerschenkron replied, "Angry? Why should you be angry? Ashamed, yes; angry, no."

The scholarly ethos of care is prominently commended in Gerschenkron's reviews and in his footnote polemics. Carefulness in the European scholarly tradition consists of avoiding error in detail and putting forward conclusions with suitable modesty. Gerschenkron here did not inhabit the world of modern economics, in which theory is said to provide a check on facts and in which a blackboard exercise is said to have "policy implications." Most particularly he detested theories of history that can in their rigidity supply bridges across evidential voids—Marxism most notably—and favored theories such as the one of Arnold Toynbee that provided merely a way to shape the facts into a story.

Sir John Hicks, later a Nobel laureate in economics and one of the great theorists in the field, wrote a lamentable book called *A Theory of Economic History* (1969), based on his ruminations (untempered by enough trips to the library) about what medieval life must have been like—that is, theoretically speaking. In the book Hicks advanced the notion, which some other equally close students of the period have adopted, that manorialism and serfdom were voluntary exchanges of labor for “protection” between lord and peasant. Gerschenkron noted in a typical turn that “the possibility that the main, if not the only, danger against which the peasant very frequently was in need of protection was the very lord is not mentioned.”

He wrote judgmentally about scholarly discourse, raising up or breaking down another scholar's ethos. Such judgments are usually suppressed in scholarly prose. In a few pages early in *Europe in the Russian Mirror* he admired Tugan-Baranovskii: “valuable contribution”; “probably the most original Russian economist, . . . amazingly broad in his interests”; and, his greatest compliment, “a serious scholar.” Such compliments served, in fact, more to honor the author than the subject—which, after all, was their rhetorical purpose. The author exhibited the good taste to admire the best work. The old Russian economist's “amazingly broad interests” turned out to be merely subjects within economics; whereas the writer himself, also a Russian economist, ranged over mathematics, Western literature, and the history of baseball.

David Riesman wrote in *Constraint and Variety in American Education* that academic life, “looked at from the perspective of our national problems, . . . seems remote and crazy like a sport, and it so strikes perhaps the majority of students. But . . . we always hope that if we run well enough, some students will run the race too, and become as crazy as we.” Gerschenkron's theory of teaching was successful at making his students as crazy as he.

To speak in rhetorical terms, he taught by ethos. The beginning, or exordium, of a speech is meant in the classical system to establish ethos, the good character that warrants attention. Gerschenkron's presentation of self was largely ethical in this sense. He did not teach by *explicatio* or *amplificatio*.

A person's life is an argument. We think less of Marx for his neglect of Jenny and his

ignorance of physical work; and we think less of the modernist heroes of economics now for their frank appeals to selfishness, exhibited in their lives. Gerschenkron shaped his life to better values. Although I do not think he was a paragon, he stood the bigger tests. In the year of tested values, 1968, for example, this private man spoke publicly against nihilism at Harvard. He gave a famous speech to one of the tumultuous faculty meetings (at which my father played whip to John Dunlop's leadership of the “conservatives”), “The Most Amazing Thing,” based on a Hans Christian Andersen tale. (The year was a strain on my father, who had an unknown heart condition himself; he died the next summer.)

After the torrent, Gerschenkron retreated for a while to the Institute for Advanced Study. There another Gerschenkron tale was generated, a tribute more to his erudition than to his originality. An administrator from Princeton came out to the Institute with the strange purpose of discussing a proposal for a black studies program. Academic life was abuzz with the black power intimidations at Cornell. The Princeton administrator had an understandably difficult time getting the fellows, Gerschenkron among them, to see the merits in the proposal. He finally gave up arguing and blurted out, “Well, we have to do something: after all, they have the guns.” A stunned silence descended on the group, into which Gerschenkron dropped the reply: “When I hear the word *guns*, I reach for my culture.”

When the Soviet tanks rolled in Prague, Gerschenkron spoke eloquently at the meetings of the American Economic History Association, at Brandeis that year (Rostow, I remember, would rush out of meetings to take telephone calls from President Lyndon B. Johnson), against international participation in a conference at Leningrad. His advocacy, like that at Harvard, was unsuccessful, and the association decamped to Leningrad, honoring the tyrants.

You can see why his students worshipped him. He was, as the kids say (and so did we), cool—that is, self-possessed, courageous, outspoken, witty, an ethos attractive to the young but combined with a mature scholarly purpose.

What did I learn from such a walking exordium? It was not his particular theories of economic history (assessed recently in a book

edited by two other students, Richard Sylla and Gianni Toniolo). It was his way of life, and especially his mixing of genres, mixing democratic with highbrow amusements, literature with science, economics with history, mathematics with words. I formed an image of a complete scholar, that American scholar we honor in this magazine. He is not, as Emerson said, Thinking Man but Man Thinking; not a specialized thumb or brain strutting about, but a whole person who exercises all powers.

The image is of course crazy, and depressing to boot, because none of the students could come close to the master in languages or experience. But holding it up at least keeps you from sneering at other knowledge. Specialists comfortable with being partial human beings get angry when someone says what is true of us all—that they are shamefully ignorant. Gerschenkron would counsel us: Be ashamed, yes; angry, no.

I think all his students learned this. Something I learned myself, which does not appear to be shared by many of his other students, is the importance of words in thinking. That is, I learned from his example that wordcraft, rhetoric, runs even a mathematical field like economics.

Gerschenkron himself recognized the rhetoric in science, and he especially recognized social theories as metaphors. He was aware that words are not mere tags for things behind them but have their own force in the scholar's argument. His main contribution to scholarship was to revise radically the metaphor of social "stages," which had dominated nineteenth-century and much twentieth-century social thought. Henry Maine, Auguste Comte, Friedrich List, Karl Marx, Werner Sombart, Bruno Hildebrand, and latterly Walt Rostow thought of a nation as a person, with predictable stages of development from birth to ma-

turity. The stage theorists took the child to be the father of the man. Gerschenkron was the new Freud, noting the pathologies arising from stages missed or badly taken, casting doubt on the iron law of succession.

Gerschenkron justified the economic metaphor in a mainly Kantian rather than a Baconian way. He appears to have become in time more Kantian, becoming more convinced as Kant said that "concepts without perceptions are empty; perceptions without concepts are blind." The Kantian points of view, when you think of the matter in economic terms, are similar to weights in a statistical index of industrial output. That is, they are not things in themselves. William Parker has argued that Gerschenkron's experience of transplantation from Russia to Austria to America led him to the problem of point of view. Parker's story fits Gerschenkron's fascination with index numbers, relative backwardness, and literary translation (most notably a devastating assault on Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, in *Modern Philology*, May 1966).

He was the best scholar, I would say, because he was the best rhetorician, not in some cheap definition but in its oldest and most honorable one, what Werner Jaeger called "the first humanism." Words, Gerschenkron recognized, are what we have in common, not things.

A rhetorical reading of Gerschenkron does not reveal him as a non-scientist, a mere word spinner. He shaped in his work a story of his own life, one of care and precision and attention to the words themselves. Master scientists are master rhetoricians, word spinners in no dishonorable sense, or else they do not win the argument. Gerschenkron's science was model building but also storytelling. He showed me that science is rhetoric, all the way down.