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Preface: Personal Knowledge

Deirdre McCloskey

What's the unity? Steve Ziliak's 'Introduction' gives a characteristically insightful answer. He's asked me to give my own, cruder one here.

I've been most things in my life – a socialist, a positivist, a man. I don't regret my earlier versions. They've given me sympathy for the Other, I suppose, having been one. It has certainly been interesting to wander from high-school football player to college socialist to grad-school social engineer to husband and father and professor of this and that. I remember how impressed my own father was when a guidance counselor in my 8th grade told us that I had both verbal and mathematical ability and therefore could bring the Two Cultures together. My father was a professor, too, but hopeless at math (as a student of political science he got an A in Alvin Hansen's graduate course in economics at Harvard in 1946 by reading only the words between the diagrams and equations; even in 1946 that was difficult). My father was delighted, amazed, that his son could both write poetry and understand algebra. I've gradually come back, after putting away the literary side for a couple of decades while becoming competent in the quantitative side of the science, to the theme of exploring both sides together: there's the unity . . . in disunity.

But I wish I was better at whipping the dish into a smoother texture. It's simpler if you cook one thing, or can make it look like one thing at table. Your life will be easier to grasp. Some people – I think of Paul David of Stanford and All Souls – have such unified intellectual lives. Paul is still making the argument for indivisibilities he first noticed as a Harvard graduate student in the generation just before mine. His work coheres, and coheres, and coheres. Mine ramifies, and ramifies, and ramifies. His is an arrow; mine a branch. Isaiah Berlin long ago drew a distinction between hedgehogs and foxes: the hedgehogs know one big thing, the foxes many little things. I guess Paul is a hedgehog who wants to be a fox; I'm definitely a fox who wants to be a hedgehog.

All right, Deirdre. Answer the question. What's the unity? Make your case for hedgehogness, arrowness, the One Uniform Dish. This: I have always detested self-satisfied conventions, which makes me a radical of sorts. I'm an odd one, since I get just as annoyed at the self-satisfaction of the right as of the left or center. When I hear the phrase delivered with a smirk, 'It's obvious that,' I reach for my oomph. I have always believed in oomph. (I learned the other day that in the 1930s and 1940s oomph meant 'sex appeal;' that's nice, but I use it here in its more recent sense, something like 'force; strength of effect.')

When I hear the words 'large' and 'significant' I reach for my yardsticks of oomphness. So from the earliest to the latest of the papers reprinted here you will see, I hope, that I'm a radical oomphist. There. I get very upset by the unsupported sneering that dominates academic life, the rhetoric of oomph-less ideology. I think a socialism needs to show that some new government intervention will do

better than in the past. That's why I admire Baran and Sweezy's great (and mistaken) work: it tries to show that Marxism has oomph, rather than merely asserting it. A capitalism needs to show that competition actually works. That's why I admire Friedman's great (and mistaken) work: it tries to show that monetarism and free markets have oomph, though sometimes merely asserting it. A 'showing' in my little personal methodology involves actually thinking through the conventional arguments and then subjecting them to actual measurement. In short, it's science. As the Valley girls say: Duh. Or in Yiddish: So what else is new?

What's surprising is how few people want to do economic science. I get depressed by the rarity of people like Margaret Reid or Robert Fogel or Barbara Bergmann or Richard Caves. The great disappointments of my personal-intellectual life have been discovering that one hero or heroine after another turns out to be just another sneering ideologue, unwilling to take a chance with her conventional wisdom. Thus Bob Lucas; or George Stigler. I like to focus on Milton Friedman's most terrifying seminar question, 'How do you know?' (In my first week as an assistant professor at Chicago I was holding forth about the 'monopoly' of professional sports, a fact I had learned from Milton, when he himself looked up at me and inquired, 'How do you know? What makes you think that professional sports is a monopoly?' I had no idea. I could hardly reply, 'You told me so.') I've taken to telling graduate students that if they ask Milton's Question of every paragraph they write they will become good scientists; if of every sentence, great ones.

Of course if you accept without rethinking the convention that words and numbers are opposites the 'How do you know?' reduces to quantification. So for a long while I was a simpleminded positivist, until I noticed that the positivism didn't really get to the oomph. It's phony. The real reasons we come to scientific conclusions are not, say, proving existence theorems or finding statistically significant correlations. These matter a teensie bit. But mainly, I realized in the early 1980s (twenty years into the study of economics, so you can see I was a slow learner), the two bankrupt methods of modern economics are a small part of proper scientific persuasion.

I know it looks like my work splits into numbers and words, cliometrics and rhetoric. But don't you see, gentle reader, that both are radically oomphist? That both ask, 'How do you know?' Sometimes the answer is, 'Because total factor productivity was not hugely different between Britain and America,' or 'Because the correlation of yields in close fields is small enough to make scattering worthwhile.' And sometimes (more times than a simpleminded positivist would imagine, as I've come to realize) it is, 'Because of all the good reasons one might believe that markets are integrated internationally, they are integrated internationally, despite the insistence of one-instrument folk that they are not.' Or, 'Because the question is one of meaning, not of behavior.'

I'll keep trying to get the recipe for the dish right, a pound of quantification, a liter of poetics, a pinch of common sense. Is there unity? Will the dish ever make it to the table? I guess so, if I live long enough, even though I keep thinking at the last minute of new ingredients – feminism, Christianity, calibrated simulation. But please do stay. There's plenty to eat. Have a seat, now. May I get you something to drink?

PART I

WRITING HISTORICAL ECONOMICS AS IF MEASUREMENT MATTERED