

“Commentary [on Rossetti and Mirowski].” Pp. 261-271 in Neil de Marchi, ed. *Post-Popperian Methodology of Economics*. Recovering Practice. Boston: Kluwer, 1992.

**COMMENTARY BY DONALD N. McCLOSKEY**

Economics, thank the Lord, is starting to look at itself with a richer theory of discourse than the received view in the philosophy of science. Economists believe they follow the received view, but of course they do not. No one does. Three decades of work in the philosophy, history, sociology, and now the rhetoric of science has shown that the self-descriptions of the natives are not to be listened to uncritically. As the psychologist David Bakan remarked early in the work, “The common rhetorical form ‘science is this’ and ‘science is that’ is hardly ever backed up with empirical observations on the scientific enterprise itself” (1967, 140). The chapters by Jane Rossetti and Philip Mirowski identify new places from which to observe what economists actually do.

I have only minor disagreements, therefore, with their chapters and programs. We agree that paying attention to words differs from claiming that economics is not scientific. To suppose that being literary about economics is a denial of the scientific character of economics is to fall into the dichotomy of modernism, that you are either a Dr. Strangelove scientist or a Santa Monica touchie-feelie. Rossetti, Mirowski, and I—with a small but growing number of other economists who have woken from the long sleep of modernism—believe that you can be a scientist (small s) yet still be conscious of your rhetoric. Newton was; Darwin was; it is time that economic scientists became so.

My main disagreement with Rossetti is unfair to her excellent chapter. She and I note that the job in literary criticism is to read texts; the job in economics is to read the economy and to read the texts of economists about the economy. The jobs are similar, we

agree, and therefore, economists can learn from literary critics. But if someone looked at her chapter alone, and had not dipped into the other literary criticism of economics by Arjo Klamer, or Roy Weintraub, or a few others, he might come away with the impression that literary criticism consists of deconstruction.

In the 1950s, an older man who had studied economics at college in his youth asked Bob Solow to recommend to him a book to freshen his knowledge. Bob told him that a good elementary book, which any lay person could handle, was "Samuelson," by which he meant *Economics*. A month later the man bumped into Solow again and said, "My word, economics has become mathematical! I couldn't make head nor tail of that book by Samuelson you recommended." It developed that the fellow had got hold of *Foundations of Economic Analysis* instead of *Economics*. No wonder he found it hard going. I worry that Rossetti's emphasis on deconstruction, which is the *Foundations* of literary criticism though not its foundation, will have the same effect.

Rossetti is serious about the use of literary theory in reading economics (she has taken the unusual step of actually learning something about literary theory; by contrast, the opponents of a literary approach have so far reckoned they can get along without knowing what they oppose). Certainly anyone who is serious, pro or con, ought to know something about deconstruction. But to recommend it as necessary for a literary reading of economics would be like recommending Tom Sargent's latest book as necessary for a non-literary reading of economics. Both French deconstruction and freshwater macroeconomics (which have more than a few similarities) are good to know about and sometimes useful. But anyone who viewed them as the whole of literary criticism or the whole of economic science would be making a big mistake. You could frighten someone away from modern economics by telling them that math-proud economics was its essence. Likewise, you could frighten someone away from modern criticism by telling them that French leftwing criticism was its essence. I worry that focusing on something so terrifying as deconstruction will give economists a cheap excuse to go on ignoring the other half of their intellectual culture.

Deconstruction, for all the calls to arms from intellectually conservative publications like *The New York Times*, constitutes only a tiny part of criticism. It is not even the most recent of literary theories (feminism and new historicism are). It is merely one of a

score of partially overlapping ways to do literary criticism. A partial list in historical order would contain: rhetorical, philological, belles lettristic, historical, new critical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, reader-response, deconstructive, feminist, and new historicist. In the same way you could divide up economics into Good Old Chicago School, eclectic econometric macro, nouvelle Chicago, highbrow general equilibrium, policy oriented micro, and so forth.

The reason I have to make the point is that people have a way of seeing a novelty such as literary approaches to economics through the strangest version with which they imagine they are familiar. Thus, outsiders to economics think they can reject a modest version of supply side economics by attacking what they imagine are the opinions of Arthur Laffer. The reason people do this is that they are naturally conservative, intellectually speaking, and would rather avoid investing in a new set of thinking tools if they can get away with it. You cannot blame journalists and other people outside the thinking racket for taking evasive action when they are presented with a new idea, but you *can* blame the professors. Contrary to what one might suppose, professors are especially inflexible about new ideas because they are paid large sums to know things already. As Harry Truman put it, "An expert is someone who doesn't want to learn anything new, because then he wouldn't be an expert." The professors reckon they know a thing or two about literary criticism if they had a college English course, or about economics if they took macroeconomics twenty years ago.

I myself have two objections to deconstruction (I *do* know a thing or two about it: some of my best friends are deconstructionists). The first is that as the *Times* has cleverly discerned, deconstruction does combine politics with literature. I don't like the combination any better than does the *Times*. No one could deny that the two are connected, but the deconstructionists (and, by the way, Philip Mirowski) think they are indissoluble. They want to make every literary question into a political question. The literary critic Gerald Graff argues persuasively against such a move. He wishes to "get beyond the whole dubious project on attaching specific political implications to [literary] theories independent of the way they operate in concrete social practice. A theory such as interpretive objectivism doesn't 'imply' any single politics. . . . Making political judgments and classifications of theories requires an analysis of social practices. Is there any reason to think current literary critics possess such an

analysis?" (1983, 604f).

My second objection is that deconstruction seems stuck on a problem that I do not regard as a problem. Jacques Derrida's problem is that he is vexed with his inability to found his beliefs on bedrock. Unlike American pragmatists, he cares. After all, he and the other deconstructionists are French, schooled from childhood in Cartesian foundationalism; French people find American pragmatism or British eclecticism irritatingly casual about foundations. Deconstruction freezes itself in the anguished moment of disillusion, repeating over and over the mantra of lost illusions—"Seek not foundations for language." The American economist admits it is so, gives a sympathetic smile, and then gets back to work.

In this connection, on the matter of grounded Truth, I need to make only one adjustment to Rossetti's accurate and equitable summary of my own views. She writes, "McCloskey's stance isn't that we couldn't find truth if we wanted to, but that it is not what we want to do." I would say rather that we would not know Truth even if we found it since we do not have a path to God's understanding, and that in any case we do not want Truth—we want truth, small t, which is the practical knowledge we have of crossing the street or detecting electrons.

And yet the deconstructionists can help in literary work, as Rossetti's paper argues well. One insight that I think Derrida and company is properly to be credited with is the notion of verbal "hierarchy." Economists need help in "deprivileging," as the professors of literature would put it, the superior term in pairs like "micro-foundations/macroeconomics" or "general/partial" or "rigorous/informal."

Rossetti does not deliver a deconstructionist account of the work of W. C. Mitchell or of other economists. She is writing about deconstruction, not showing it in action. The action can be shown easily. Look back for an example at the passage from Mitchell about "subconscious wishing" that Rossetti quotes (p. 220). It contains at least these half-spoken hierarchies ready for liberating deconstruction (reading back to front, the terms in square brackets being those implied but not mentioned): sober/subconscious, thought/wishing, product/[mere ephemera], sciences/[mere humanities], study/[beach reading], one/[you personally], leads/[compels], view/[grounded conviction], sciences/[mere] processes, development/[mere chaotic change], must/[can]. The first term of each is the privileged one—except that in the pairs leads/[compels] and view/[grounded conviction] they are

in fact polite self-deprecation, with ironic force: Mitchell is on the contrary claiming the commanding heights of compelling and grounded conviction, not the soft valleys of mere gently leading views.

That's quite a haul for two sentences, and suggests that Derrida and his followers might be of some use to the economic reader, if she can figure out what in hell he is saying (no easy task, I assure you). In the vernacular, the economist Mitchell is playing all kinds of mind games on us readers, and we'd better watch out. Mitchell, of course, is not special. We all do it, both you and I. It is nothing to be ashamed about because as Rossetti stresses, the "economics is impossible to separate from the rest of the world." I would only add that the rest of the world we cannot be separated from is rhetoric.

Rossetti does well to remind us of that Wesley Clair Mitchell. American economists need to know about this surprisingly influential man, as influential in shaping American economics as was Paul Samuelson a generation later. He helped create the American enthusiasm for social engineering, writing for example in 1924 that "In economics as in other sciences we desire knowledge mainly as an instrument of control. Control means the alluring possibility of shaping the evolution of economic life to fit the developing purposes of the race" (quoted in Adelstein, 1990, 13). The erotic fascism of such ambitions for science was ravishing in the 1920s and 1930s. We still have not entirely gotten over it.

Rossetti's analysis of Mitchell's influence, I repeat, is not particularly deconstructionist. The social construction of knowledge is no invention of the deconstructionists. It has been a commonplace from Protagoras of Abdera to the present. When Mitchell himself speaks of sciences as "the product not merely of sober thinking but also of subconscious wishing," he is doing nothing more avant garde than reinscribing Francis Bacon's idols (with a Freudian fillip). And when Rossetti discusses Mitchell she is doing nothing more avant garde than reinscribing Protagoras: man is the measure of all things. But whether the point is entirely novel or not, Rossetti and I basically agree on it.

When I turn to Mirowski, I have more disagreement. Rossetti may be a little stuck on deconstruction, but Mirowski has not yet read literary criticism, deconstructive or rhetorical, or reader response, or new critical or whatever. Until he does his homework on literary criticism, it is going to be hard to take his literary criticism seriously. Mirowski, as I have remarked, believes in a dubious sociology of knowledge that there is an intimate connection between philosophies

and practices. It is like saying that free verse and free love go together. (Such a view written out on the final exam is what would come from not turning in one's homework.)

This is my main problem with Mirowski and with other less sympathetic critics of a rhetorical approach. In a nutshell, they do not know what they are talking about and seem to be pleased that they do not. Their attitude reminds me of a reply that John Searle, the American analytic philosopher, gave me once when I asked him if he had read Hegel. "I have never read a page of Hegel; and furthermore, I propose never to do so." The reply evoked gales of laughter from the philosophy graduate students gathered around the great man, who thus exhibited his disdain for the considered judgment of half his culture.

But let me admit that even though Mirowski has not done his homework, he is so bright that he gets a pretty good grade on the McCloskey exam anyway. I agree with him, for example, that economists engage in methodology even while attacking it. Paul Samuelson and George Stigler are good examples: most papers these two have written contain methodological ukases mixed with lofty sneering at the very idea of thinking about thinking. Contrast James Buchanan, say, or Gordon Tullock, who have never apologized for making methodological points and have realized when they are doing it, since both are more than economists.

Mirowski and I agree, too, that the scientific paper is a literary device. If Mirowski must come to this realization through recent philosophy and sociology, I guess I should not object. At least he gets the point. True, it is vexing when he does not understand that the philosopher Markus's point is a commonplace of criticism, and has been since the Greeks. That the scientific paper in economics is a literary genre has been, of course, the main point of my tiny little ten-year contribution to the stream. But anyway, he comes to the same conclusion, which we agree is crucial for a reformed economics.

And the substantive stories he tells are excellent. I was shocked at the story about Larry Summers's travail at the NBER conference. Maybe "shocked" is not quite the right word; "depressed," rather, for it has been some time since intellectual thuggery has surprised me. Virginia Woolf deplored the philological wars of earlier times, "the extraordinary spectacle of men of learning and genius, of authority and divinity, . . . calling each other names for all the world like bookies on a racecourse or washerwomen in a back street" (1925 (1953), 198-99). Modern times witness the extraordinary spectacle of

men and women of science behaving for all the world like *mafiosi* in conference or Chicago aldermen trying to keep the newspapers in the dark. Professors will do almost anything to prevent the calling of their rhetorical bluff. Mirowski instances the study of replication. I would add statistical significance (Bakan 1967, Chapter 1; Denton 1988). Economists go on using statistical significance even though the alert among them know that it cannot do what it is claimed to do—namely, tell an economist whether a coefficient is large enough to be scientifically interesting.

The biggest disagreement between Mirowski and me is over the word "neoclassical." Like a lot of people, he makes his scorn for mainstream, neoclassical economics much simpler by characterizing neoclassical economics in its silliest possible terms. Recall the problem with highlighting deconstruction. Similarly, the enemies of institutionalist, or Marxist, or Austrian economics make their life simpler by characterizing each as so idiotic as to be self-refuting.

Mirowski has in mind the formalism that identifies economic science with certain routines of constrained maximization. I do not deny that there exist terminally silly neoclassical economists who espouse such a model for economics, and who are often people with little experience of life. "The neoclassicals," says Mirowski, "have never been able to avail themselves of the full panoply of the 'experimental form of life,' and worse, espouse a theory which presumes a form of radical methodological individualism." But his characterization does not fit most neoclassicals. Marshall was a neoclassical economist; Keynes was a neoclassical economist; Theodore Schultz is a neoclassical economist; Robert Solow is a neoclassical economist; Ronald Coase is a neoclassical economist; and to descend quite a few notches, I am a neoclassical economist.

So it is wrong, to give an instance, for Mirowski to claim that neoclassical economics "has no explanation for how equilibrium is achieved." In partial equilibrium terms, the story is simple and convincing. It is no less an explanation than institutionalist explanations for how institutions are achieved, or Marxist explanations for how class dominance is achieved. Maybe general equilibrium with continuous traders in Banach space and other Monty Python versions of economic science have "no explanation" for what they see before them, but the same is not true of most neoclassical economics, working in the here and now.

Mirowski's basic notion in disagreement with me is that there is

something inconsistent between using neoclassical economics, as I do in economic history, and yet being self-conscious about rhetoric, as I claim to be: to "renounce the scientism of economic discourse while maintaining the scientific explanatory structure was inherently self-contradictory." He is repeating a claim he made at some length a few years ago in his urbane but ignorant reaction to *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1987 (1988)). He has repeated the notion since on many occasions and seems satisfied to stop his thinking there. I admit that I still don't get it. I still don't see why "the theory of social order in Rhetoric [is not] congruent with the notions of social order in neoclassical theory." And I still don't see why it matters if it is not.

Anyway, in my kind of neoclassicism, order of the economy is the same as the order of the speech. My kind is Keynes's kind, and Coase's kind, and the kind of many other neoclassicals. My kind reverses the metaphor: the market itself is a conversation, to be negotiated, driven by rules of talk. Think of Keynes's animal spirits and Coase's transaction costs. Advertising of consumers' goods is the obvious and easy example. Notice how much sellers and buyers of producers' goods talk to each other, filling airplanes with talkers on their way to conversations. Again, Larry Summers would, I think, agree with Arjo Klamer and me that the stockmarket is a conversation of humankind, most of whose motion cannot be attributed to "objective" events (and even these are read through language). As Klamer and Metin Cosgel have argued recently, still again, the entrepreneur is above all a rhetor, a persuader of bankers and workers and customers. The market lives on the lips of men and women, not in some place or on some graph. No neoclassical economist who thinks with something other than his engineering math book (and even not all of them) would deny such notions.

The neoclassical economists who have grasped the literary approach have mainly agreed with it: I would instance Robert Lucas, Theodore Schultz, Robert Solow, and Frank Hahn. They are not agreeing to anything very shocking. Mirowski himself joins me in noting that even the formalism depends on, as Nietzsche put it, "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding" (1870 (1979), 84).

The analysis of a language game—deconstruction, among others,

if you wish—is not the same as advocating its destruction. The deconstructionists themselves often commit this error, being sometimes of a nihilist and usually of a radical hue, so it is not surprising that deconstruction has come to be associated with radicalism (root-and-branch). But as the literary critic Stanley Fish is fond of saying when he is trying to make the same point, nothing is implied by analysis. In particular, realizing that a language game is being played with certain elaborate rules, does not imply that one wants to stop the game or even change its direction. One realizes in baseball that there is an explicit, if complicated rule, called the infield fly rule. One realizes also that there is an implicit, if simple rule, that a player can cheat in certain ways (hide the ball as a first baseman in an attempt to catch the runner off base) and that, if not caught, the player is not held up for opprobrium. Realizing that such rules are in force does not imply a criticism of baseball in the nonacademic sense of "criticism." It does not imply that one disapproves of the sanctioned cheating, for example; it does not imply that a game in which the players realize that the infield fly rule is in operation will be paralyzed in an attitude of self-regard or filled with doubt that baseball has adequate foundations.

A lack of understanding of the rules is conservative because it leads to an uncritical following of whatever rules happen to be going at the moment: "That's the way we do it; don't ask me why, or even very closely, what." The corresponding attitude in literary criticism is a seat-of-the-pants belles lettrism, such as most educated people evince, fiercely but uncritically devoted, say, to a traditional canon of great works which they never read. (I am not denying that a belles lettristic attitude can be argued seriously; I am merely saying that often it is not.)

It does not follow, however, that understanding of the rules is necessarily radical. My radical friends, such as Mirowski, cannot get this straight. That conservatives do X does not mean that radicals necessarily do not-X. I admit that the sense of identity that motivates so much political and academic dispute tends to drive people into such absurdities as "Conservatives are polite in controversy [supposing for the sake of argument that they are; in my experience, actually, they are not]; therefore to be a proper radical I must be abusively impolite in controversy." It reminds me of a remark of E. A. G. Robinson, in an obituary on Keynes. The man himself did not believe "that nonsense syllogism that has so much bemused economics in recent years: I want to be a great man; Lord Keynes is a great man; Lord

Keynes always says something that appears to be paradoxical nonsense; therefore I must discover something that is paradoxical nonsense and say it. Truth is too delicate a fabric to be best produced as a by-product of intellectual vanity" [1947, 26]. Truth (small t, mind you) is too delicate a fabric to be best produced as from a superficial equation of verbal methods and political position.

In other words, it does not follow, *contra* Mirowski and Rossetti, that because I claim to have noted some of the rules of economic discourse that I am committed to overthrowing them. One can admire the economic game, as I do, and yet look into its rules, even with a notion of improving them. Come to think of it, the infield fly rule needs some work.

Yet Rossetti and Mirowski have made fine beginnings. Whatever minor differences I have with them, we entirely agree that economics needs to be looked at honestly, in a way that does not merely reproduce the official picture of economics. Incidentally, recent work on the history of econometrics has been disappointing on this score. Someone could do a serious history of econometrics that did not swallow its methodological pretenses by focusing on how the arguments were in fact sustained.

Talking in Rossetti's, or Mirowski's, or my way about the social construction of economics or other sciences is not to fall into dread Relativism. The Johnsonians among philosophers need not commence kicking rocks and pounding tables to show that the world is more than socially constructed. The world is still there, but we are still constructing it. It is like fishing. The fish are there by God's command, but humans make the nets. To catch fish we need both. It is unhelpful to argue that the caught fish are "really" social or "really" objective. They had better be both, or we are not going to eat on Fridays.

Mirowski's opening story of a literary criticism of economics degenerating to Methodology bashing is behindtimes, and arises again from his lamentable ignorance of literary criticism. Klamer, Weintraub, and as you can see, Rossetti, have in fact gone on to more detailed analyses in a literary vein. It is no longer just a proposal to be rejected on merely speculative grounds. The conversational methodology in economics, which seems frozen around 1965, has not so much been rejected as by-passed by literary approaches to economics. If someone wants to continue ruminating endlessly on Friedman's article of 1953, like a neurotic washing his hands fifty

times a day, I suppose nothing can be done. But people who want a pointed and, yes, even a radical criticism of economics will be in the market for something else. Rhetoric, believe me, is what they are looking for.

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