Inattention to Community in the History of Economic Thought

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October, 2009

The authors of the articles in this special issue of HOPE stretch over more than two centuries and two continents, but they share a conclusion that there is a good deal to be learned in the history of economic thought from close examination of the intellectual communities in which economists have often been embedded through time. Some of these communities have been described as “schools” associated with a commanding individual (e.g. Quesnay and the Physiocrats). Others are identified with single universities more than single individuals (e.g. Chicago, Harvard, and Virginia). Some of the communities examined here brought economists into close proximity with artists and intellectuals from other disciplines (e.g. the Vienna Circle and Bloomsbury). Still others grew out of a commitment to a certain kind of policy that was widely controversial (e.g. economists in the OEO). What distinguishes a “community” from simply a random collection of individuals with whom economists have interacted is its continuous existence over time and its distinctive identity, at least when viewed historically. It is our general hypothesis that these communities can be treated usefully as distinct phenomena when we try to understand the history of economic thought and
may be approached using tools from other fields such as the history of
science, geography, social psychology, and literary theory. Economists, we
find, are like other mortals and are affected in complex ways by the social
units of which they are a part. Therefore some of their history must involve
the study of these units in addition to the experience of the individuals..

Yet the fact remains that historians of economics until recently have paid
remarkably little attention to intellectual communities. The work of Denis
O’Brien on the Classical Economists stands out as an exception, as do some
major biographies; and a few collections of letters of economists that
demonstrate nicely their communal activities. But these are slim pickings.
we reflect here on some of the possible reasons for this paradox of
inattention to “community” in the history of economics.

Ironically, historians of economics were quick to appreciate progress in the
history, sociology, and philosophy of science a half century ago, and in
 emulation they prepared studies using the work of Thomas Kuhn, Imre
Lakatos, and other philosophers and historians of science. They grasped that
there could be approaches to their subject other than the familiar
biographical narrative and textual exegesis. They knew about the studies of
“big science” covering, in particular the Manhattan Project and other war work. So why did they did not follow these paths for economics? For the most part the history of economics has continued to be presented, especially in text books, through the familiar “Lewis and Clark” model wherein lonely, and intrepid explorers push out the research frontier, sometimes supported by followers and sometimes impeded by them, but insufficiently engaged with colleagues overall to warrant close attention to them as a community. Why so? Could it be that an explanation for this myopia can be discerned by examining the landmark contributions of our distinguished forbears in what I have called elsewhere “The Golden Age of the History of Economics”? Were models leaving aside community established perhaps at this earlier time to which later historians came readily to adhere? Seeking answers to these questions I took from my bookshelf, and reread after several decades, ten canonical works from the Golden Age, roughly the second quarter of the twentieth century. The authors come from a wide range of approaches to economics: conventional neo-classical micro-economics, the Scottish tradition of Adam Smith, Austrian economics, American Institutional economics, and the ideological left. The works are Alexander Gray, *The Development of Economic Doctrines* (1931), Wesley Clair Mitchell, *Types of Economic Theory* (1967, prepared 1913-1937), John R. Commons,
Institutional Economics (1934), John Maynard Keynes, Essays in Biography (1933), Joseph Schumpeter, A History of Economic Analysis (1954), and Ten Great Economists (1951) Jacob Viner, Studies in the Theory of International Trade (1937), Lionel Robbins, An Essay on The Nature and Significance of Economic Science (1932), Mark Blaug, Economic Theory in Retrospect (1962) and Robert Heilbroner, The Worldly Philosophers (1953). In none of these works is the question addressed directly of whether communities should be explored in the history of economics. The nearest thing to a full discussion can be found in the works by Mitchell and Schumpeter. In most cases, however, positions can be discerned by inference. What follows is an account of findings from these works, and some interpretations of the findings.

All of the authors of these ten works did, in fact, pay some attention to intellectual communities that were relevant to the history of economics, although in most cases they did so just in passing. Indeed, a list of communities culled from their works (Table 1) is a useful guide for scholars today searching for examples of communities. These writers use a variety of terms and metaphors to describe communities, often with little distinction among them. The most popular terms are circle, movement, group, school
and the pejorative “sect”. The expression “Ricardo and his Circle”, for example, was common parlance in these works (e.g. M I, 261) as was “the group of Philosophical Radicals” (M I, 267). The reason given most often for mentioning communities is that they were thought to have increased (or in a few cases reduced) the impact of important innovators by making their work widely known and influential in the policy world. But there is little suggestion that these communities helped to stimulate the scientific achievement itself. (E.g.. M. I, 190). Even Wesley Mitchell who predicated his enormous text on the need for greater attention to “context” in the history of economics, attended to the social and political background of great economists in minute detail but paid very little attention to the intellectual communities in which these economists lived and worked. While providing abundant biographical detail about many of the economists, he said little about the communal environments upon which some, at least, were dependent. Sometimes his approach is suggestive of the influence of community, as when he writes of Adam Smith’s involvement with numerous clubs (M. I, 135), but then he steps back. The implication in his work is that scientific advance is achieved by scientists working on their own; stimulation, dissemination and implementation of their ideas may be by communities, but these communities are also problematic and overall not the
appropriate concern of historians of economics. Sometimes the reader gets
the sense that promising opportunities have been missed as when, in rich
discussions of the Scholastic doctors in the Middle Ages there is little
attention to the ways in which this Europe-wide academic community
operated at that time or how the great teaching orders behaved as scholarly
communities.

One model that was popular among these historians in describing a group of
like-minded scholars working together is a religious one; there a single
“prophet” or ”messiah” worked with disciples whose task it was to spread
the gospel. The prophets in this rather unsavory model were, of course, often
in competition with each other for disciples. Mitchell wrote: “Edgeworth
increasingly considered himself a disciple of Marshall, Jevons was thus left
with relatively few disciples. Among the people definitely enlisted under his
banner, one may note particularly his most faithful disciple, Philip H.
Wicksteed” (M. II, 98). Similarly Schumpeter wrote of the Physiocrats:
“They were all of them disciples, nay, pupils of Quesnay in the strictest and
most meaningful sense these terms will bear – disciples who absorbed and
accepted the master’s teaching with a fidelity for which there are but two
analogues in the whole history of economics: the fidelity of the orthodox
Marxists to the message of Marx and the fidelity of the orthodox Keynesians to the message of Keynes. They were a school by virtue of doctrinal and personal bonds, and always acted as a group, praising one another, fighting one another’s fights, each member taking his share in group propaganda. They would in fact illustrate the nature of that sociological phenomenon to perfection had they not been more than a scientific school: they formed a group united by what amounted to a creed; they were indeed what they had been called so often, a Sect. This fact naturally impaired their influence upon every economist, French or foreign, who was not prepared to take the vows to One Master and One Doctrine” (S. HEA, 223-224). Although this suggestive ecclesiastical metaphor of slavish obedience to a master was used rather casually, it was applied usually as an expression of contempt rather than of interpretation and its appropriateness and implications were not questioned or explored in any depth. Schumpeter was especially scathing of the close followers of Karl Marx “for whom the prophet’s every word is eternal truth and for whom dissent spells not only error but sin” (HEA, 384), and also of the Philosophical Radicals, whom he called the self-appointed “apostles” of utilitarianism “at first a small circle that gathered round Bentham and James Mill” but who developed a strong “creed” and “propaganda machine” (HEA, 408 and 409). Schumpeter’s discussion of the
Physiocratic community around Quesnay is tantalizing because it seems poised to address interesting topics. But Schumpeter pulls back, almost embarrassed that he should contemplate going there. He writes: “the school was thoroughly alive to the importance of propaganda and some of its members, Baudeau and Dupont especially, were very good at it. They founded discussion groups, worked upon individuals and agencies in key positions (the parlements especially), and produced a large quantity of popular and controversial literature. Their exploits in economic journalism, however interesting in themselves, would not have to be mentioned here were it not for the fact that, rising above it, they also produced the bulk of the material that went into the pages of the first scientific periodicals in the history of economics” (HEA, 226). Schumpeter even confessed that he was opposed to examining any community too closely in the history of economics because of “the optical illusion that will victimize any historian of doctrine who concentrates his vision upon a particular group and pays inadequate attention to what lies around and, historically, before it” (HEA, 231).

Perhaps the answer to the puzzle of why in fact these great historians of economics paid so little attention to community may lie in one of these
canonical works, Schumpeter’s *History of Economic Analysis*. There he explains that a “vision” must precede all analytical work, including presumably the history of economics; this is “a preanalytic cognitive act that supplies the raw material for the analytical effort” (HEA, 42) One vision may succeed another, but the mode of analysis will remain the same. “On the one hand, we assemble further facts in addition to those perceived already, and learn to distrust others that figured in the original vision; on the other hand the very work of constructing the schema or picture will add further relations and concepts to, and in general also eliminate others from, the original stock” (HEA, 42). Schumpeter admitted that within economics “ideology” as well as conventional scientific observations might help to shape a vision. He credited Marx with recognizing that “people’s ideas are likely to glorify the interests and actions of the classes that are in a position to assert themselves and therefore are likely to draw or to imply pictures of them that may be at serious variance with the truth” (HEA, 35). Moreover, Schumpeter speculated that in the history of economics a “habit of mind” that we call “rationalization” was also likely to be present. “This habit consists in comforting ourselves and impressing others by drawing a picture of ourselves, our motives, our friends, our enemies, our vocation, our
church, our country, which may have more to do with what we like them to be than with what they are.” (HEA, 35).

So if, as Schumpeter suggests, the history of economics can be seen as a vision influenced by ideology and the need for rationalization, how does this help us understand the neglect of community? The vision we see in Schumpeter’s history of economics, and in the writings of the other major historians of economics at the time, may be described as two dimensional. In both dimensions community has little place. One dimension seems grounded in the historians’ perception of their own professional lives as economists. The other dimension is turned toward the discipline in which they have been trained.

The vision of the economics profession these historians shared seems to be very much of pioneer loners, as discussed above. They saw themselves to be out to persuade the world of their insights and wisdom and struggling against mighty forces standing in their way. Schumpeter appreciated the development of some “groups” within the economics discipline but he declined to explore them overall because of their behavior; he said: “The group accepts or refuses to accept co-workers also for reasons other than
their professional competence or incompetence. In economics this grouping took long to mature but when it did mature it acquired much greater importance than it did in physics” (HEA 47). Schumpeter sees groups in economics as a current problem, and it is as if to give groups recognition in the history is to give them credibility in the present.

Perhaps the Darwinian thinking with which all of these men grew up helped to strengthen their emphasis on individual struggle as the appropriate route to accomplishment; survival of the unfit, perhaps assisted by communal institutions of some kind could stifle progress. It is significant that all these historians were prominent practicing economists and in varying degrees in their histories they were writing their autobiographies. They saw their own success as achieved through heroic solitary struggle and they saw no reason to examine an alternative model. Their emphasis on the contributions of individuals over communities is evident sometimes even in the titles of their works: for example, Schumpeter’s *Ten Great Economists* and Keynes’s *Essays in Biography*.

Just as much as these economists were deeply influenced by their own professional experiences, and their self-image as successful independent
pioneers and innovators, their vision of the discipline that they practiced, and
its body of theory, also affected the form taken by their history. In their
historical studies of scientific progress in economics they described a
process that was quite like that they saw operating in the economy.
Competition among many participants in a market yielded good results;
concentrated markets in which groups conspired were problematic,
Efficiency in the progress of ideas just as in the economic system required
choice under constraints. Competition among economic scientists was most
likely to bring this about. They told the history of economics as first the
generation of good and bad ideas across a broad spectrum, and then their
natural selection. The historian’s role, just as that of the economist, was to
identify those that deserved to survive in the marketplace, in this case of
ideas, and those that did not. Progress in the economy as well as in economic
science occurred when societies, led by their economists, chose wisely
among alternative systems of ideas and the policies that were implied by
these ideas. Jacob Viner described his task in examining ideas about
international trade before Smith, as preparing “an inventory of the English
ideas, good and bad” (V 2). From this inventory he could then instruct
society to adopt the good and eschew the bad. Just as economic progress was
achieved by using the best and most appropriate technology so social
progress could be achieved by using the best systems of economic ideas that historians of ideas had identified. One of the main obstacles to acceptance of best policies and practices in the economy was collusion among economic actors, and collusion among thinkers might have these same bad qualities. The limitation of competition among ideas through the formation of collusive groups, as among participants in a market, led too often to inefficiencies and should not be tolerated and recorded favorably in an historical account. Collective activity of almost every kind in the intellectual realm, as in the markets of a nation, should be viewed with deep suspicion. Collusion (community?) was too often the device of scoundrels to achieve their selfish objectives: rents and destructive bureaucratic schemes.

On occasion in these histories the authors cannot resist noting wistfully that some communal activity among economists seemed to have had a constructive outcome. But then they observe that this was an exception and the outcome might have been negative. For example, Mitchell reported that Adam Smith’s liberal views on trade were strengthened by his association over 13 years with free-trade merchants in the Glasgow Political Economy Club. But if these merchants had been protectionist it was frightening to think of what the consequences might have been (M I, 143). Mitchell had
unbounded admiration for the contributions of the Philosophical Radicals to social Reform in Great Britain. “Their sciences taken as a group laid down a program of social reconstruction which has no equal in the world today for scope, consistency and confidence” (M. I, 381). Yet he expresses unease about what might have been if this intellectual juggernaut had gotten off on the wrong foot. How would such a powerful community have complicated the Darwinian struggle in the marketplace of ideas. Certainly the Philosophical Radicals were not perfect, “The basic trouble with their technical position was that their ideas of human nature were curiously schematic and unreal” (M. I, 470). But because of their strength they were able to influence many disciplines, not always for the better. “They dipped into the broad field of the social sciences at certain specific points, but they did not succeed in working out the problems, for example, of jurisprudence, of ethics, of economics, and of pedagogy so far that they edges of these disciplines overlapped; that is, they did not fuse their social sciences with each other; they did not achieve complete unity and consistency” (M. I, 393). Would it not have been better for the progress of science if members of the group of Philosophical Radicals had worked on their own?
Mitchell seemed to ask the same question of other groups that he encountered, such as the Clapham Sect, the Chartists, and the Fabians (I, 393, 412, 420). At the very least it worried him that sometimes these groups placed political objectives ahead of scientific ones, which was not to be applauded in a history of science. This was especially true, for example, of the Verein fur Sozialpolitik that had helped “in no small degree to influence public opinion in favor of larger state activity” (II, 523).

Clearly it is too much to attribute all of the inattention to community in the history of economics to the patterns established by these early pioneers, but perhaps it is not too much to suggest that these patterns may be part of the explanation not only for this aspect of the history but others as well.

Table I

Communities in the History of Economics Mentioned Briefly by the Pioneers

1. 12th Century. Scholastic Doctors. S. HEA, 100
3. 1750s Physiocrats. S. HEA, 223.
6. 1800s. School of J.B. Say. S. HEA, 497.


13. 1850s. French Engineers. S., HEA, 842.


15. 1850s. First German Historical School. S. HEA, 508 and 808.


