

## VII. ECONOMICS OF THE NEW FRONTIER III: THE SEER AND THE TRAIL-BLAZER

“Our first teacher is our own heart.” Cheyenne

“To touch the earth is to have harmony with nature.” Oglala Sioux

“All plants are our brothers and sisters. They talk to us and if we listen, we can hear them.” Arapaho

“Listen to the voice of nature, for it holds treasures for you.” Huron

Why on earth would any one of all people like to discuss Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in a brief History of Economic Thought or Political Economy as it was called into quite recently?

Well for once Emerson wrote two essays on the subject which not only lightly touch upon the field of economics but pretty well give the compass and as exhausting a treatment of it as may be given in the medium of that strange bird of a literary form called ‘essay’. The essays are *Politics* and *Wealth*.<sup>12</sup> And sure enough Henry David Thoreau takes up his mentor on this subject as well as on a number of others. Not only does Thoreau consciously entitle the first chapter of his magnum opus *Walden: Economy*, but he also with equal conscientiousness follows up a train of thought started by Emerson in *Politics* and develops it further, nay, gives it even a significantly more radical and different spin in his rightly famous, if for the ruling class understandably uncomfortable *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. Further even a writer as hostile to Emerson as Thornton Wilder does not deny the great transcendentalist New England philosopher the right to speak intelligently on a subject seemingly as mundane and ornery as Economics.

It may be held against them both that their lofty, essayistic, philosophic style of writing is not conducive to a subject as clear-cut, hard, dry, and empirical as our Science of Wealth. But this argument is not valid. David Hume, who was the great clandestine father of the Classical Economists as we have seen above, contributed nothing but essays to Political Economy.

And although Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a kind of writing we would today classify under tract or treatise, it is difficult to imagine our Science without it. What “serious [read boring] economists” most disdain about writers of the caliber of Heilbroner or Bertrand Russell is precisely that hard-to-pin-down-and-refute quality of an essayist.

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<sup>12</sup> . R. W. Emerson, *Politics*, from *Essays: Second Series – The Complete Works – Vol. IV*. 1844, and *Wealth*, from *Conduct of Life – The Complete Works – Vol. VI*, 1860 both RWE.org

The sheer populist intelligibility and fun of reading, e.g. Kenneth Galbraith's *Brief History of Financial Euphoria* or much if not all of Henry George's work, notably the *Reduction to Iniquity*, his retort of Campbell's *The Prophet of San Francisco* – which is incidentally no mean essay itself -, or George's concluding chapter: *Principal Brown* of his pungent refutation of Spencer's *A Perplexed Philosopher* are due to the paramount essayistic quality of these authors.

That obviously leads to the question: What exactly is an essay?

And the simple answer is that if you tend to fall asleep over it chances are quite considerable that it is not an essay! The British and the French writers traditionally have vied for the privilege to have invented this literary form, but beyond national bias there can be no doubt that the French carry the prize. Although Dr. Johnson's dyspeptic definition of an essay as an "irregular, undigested piece" bears witness to that national jealousy as well as it unjustly denies the considerable essayistic qualities of much of his own writings it is Michel de Montaigne and La Bruyere who are generally and undisputedly credited of having been the originators of that art form. An essay is experimental in character and touches the subject but lightly while a treatise tries to exhaust it systematically. Hence Locke would not well qualify today as an essay writer, but Turgot, even Quesnay would to a certain extent - as the French mind tends to have a sharp, quicksilver quality that lends itself with ease to the form.

It may be added that the present writer next to Hume and Russell has been much indebted to Anatole France, Robert Musil, Sri Aurobindo all of whom while managing to speak lucidly and profoundly on mundane, "barren", and difficult subjects, have been lambasted of being "mere" essay writers. One deciding criterion of an essay is wit. Here most professors wrongly feel themselves professionally excluded - another one is style. The polemicists maintain that in an essay "style prevail over substance", while obviously the great masters of essay writing prove that style - which has been defined as a graceful combination of form and content – is substance. Combining the rational and the emotional or the "logical" and the irrational into a supra-rational whole would be an essay at its best. Another litmus test of the art of essay writing is that if it's clunky and you know what comes next, it's not one. And third there are these maddening digressions loathed by scientific minds, these darn essay writers take you way off the subject on God knows what tangent and it takes you to realize twenty pages later that the "digression" gave a more intimate and sudden elucidation of the subject than any formal or systematic treatment could have done.

One who beats a dead horse over and over again and then some will in all likelihood not be up for next years Essay Pulitzer, and on that happy note we may

cordially excuse ourselves, dear patient reader, for this unnecessary digression and return to our proper subject.

Emerson goes to some length in *Politics* to prove that “the less government we have, the better”, and Thoreau, as indicated, takes him up in *Civil Disobedience* and carries the doctrine of “that government is best which governs least” to the radical anarchistic-libertarian extreme: “That government is best which governs not at all”! Emerson derives his “less government” axiom from the fact that men feel cheated in not getting their monies worth out of paying taxes as out of nearly all other things they are willing to pay a just price for. Thoreau translates the master’s thoughts into action by going to jail in tax-boycotting the US-Mexican war which makes no sense to him and which he sees to be vile machinations of political corruption.

Incidentally it made little sense to most any one else: “The President of the United States James Polk had made a pretense of trying to settle differences at the conference table. Then, without a declaration of war or Congressional approval, US forces plunged into Mexico. An inaccurate and incomplete report from the President (which has been lamely explained by the lack of electrical communication) brought authorization from Congress. Hawks and white supremacists of the day cheered. But the intellectual community gasped in horror. ... American secret agents smuggled in a puppet president from Havana. Overwhelmed by the US armor, the Mexicans resisted all the way to the gates of their capital, which fell only when their ammunition ran out. ... A captain in the army of General Winfield Scott reported that the American troops acted like savages. They shot noncombatants on trivial pretexts. ‘Their conduct toward the poor inhabitants has been horrible and their coming is dreaded like death in every village.’ Another eyewitness, Ulysses S. Grant, wrote in his memoirs: ‘I do not think there was ever a more wicked war than that waged by the United States on Mexico. I thought so at the time, when I was a youngster, only I had not the moral courage to resign.’”<sup>13</sup>

So Thoreau in active protest was not in the company of kooks and chaos-mongers, he was in the company of conservative presidents and generals. Emerson, the seer and preacher, would have shrunk back from his student’s activism and radicalism.

Translated into economic terms, however, obviously both Emerson and Thoreau then become adherents of the Classical Economist’s laissez-faire policy. In no way could either Emerson’s or Thoreau’s thoughts be construed to endorse the meddlesome, interventionist Protectionism of Mercantilism, while the extreme

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<sup>13</sup> . Jerome Lawrence & Robert E. Lee, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, preface, p. V – VI, New York , 1971

stress both lay on the factor 'nature' predestines them to a close proximity if not adherence to the tenets of the Physiocrats. We thus find Emerson and Thoreau, as economists, mind you, perfectly in line with the other Economists of the New Frontier: Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, and Henry George. They are all based soundly on Physiocratic principles while not fundamentally denying those maxims of the Classical Economists which don't stand in blatant ambiguity or contradistinction to the former.

Emerson's insight: "that truly, the only interest for the consideration of the State, is persons: that property will always follow persons; that the highest end of government is the culture of men: and if men can be educated, the institutions will share their improvement, and the moral sentiment will write the law of the land."<sup>14</sup> is significant in light of the obscurity of today's distortions in the balance between man and property. Like laws, property is there to serve man, not the reverse. To fight over land, resources, and territories while sacrificing hecatombs of the young is to stand truth on its head and mock the human dignity innately inherent in each and every one of us.

After singing a strange eulogy to the "natural rights" of the proprietor over the non-proprietor which has progressive thinkers reeling, Emerson nevertheless adds a grain of salt to his proprietorial doctrine which changes all: "Every actual State is corrupt. Good men must not obey the laws too well. What satire on government can equal the severity of censure conveyed in the word politic, which now for ages has signified cunning, intimating that the State is a trick?"<sup>15</sup> His earlier disciple Thoreau takes this prudent caveat up and carries it to its logical conclusion of "the duty" of civil disobedience. Serves the older man right to put such butterflies into the younger man's mind! These butterflies may grow unexpectedly and carry the thinker with them by the charm of their beauty. It is easy to find the fault line in the character and spirit of these two eminent, one is tempted to say primordial American thinkers, for it is right here. Where Emerson sees and questions, Thoreau strides out and acts.

It may be this reason and this quality next to Thoreau unswerving radical advocacy of nature that put him far ahead of his time which lead George in his pre-*Progress and Poverty* writings to praise Thoreau greatly. Here George does not just stand in conscious line of logical succession of the great classical economists, he safeguards the heritage of the wisdom of the greatest of American thinkers down to and including Walt Whitman.

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<sup>14</sup> . *ibid. Politics*, p. 3

<sup>15</sup> . *ibid. Politics*, p. 4