

On the Origins of *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* *Its Purposes and Objectives*

By WILL LISSNER*

ABSTRACT. This essay, written with the help of his devoted wife, Mrs. Dorothy Burnham Lissner, was prepared at the request of the current editor of the *AJES*. This essay was written during the fall of 1999. On September 10, Mrs. Lissner informed me that, "The early history of the *Journal* is all done. . . . I hope it is satisfactory . . . Will and I worked very hard on it. Long hours. . . . so I decided to interview him and take down what he said or have him answer on tape. Then I put everything together on the computer, almost like an article. He [Will Lissner] has checked it and thinks it's perfect, that we can do no better" (correspondence of D. B. Lissner with L. Moss, 9/10/99). This is the last known writing of Will Lissner and summarizes his aims, goals, and ambitions for this *Journal* nearly six decades after its founding. Had Will had more time, this essay would have been the first of a series of reflections on this history of this *Journal*.

Although, in one sense, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* can be said to have had the stirrings of its beginning in 1920 when I was 12 years old, it did not become an actual reality until many years later. Until 1941, in fact. By that time I was through college and was working as a reporter and correspondent on the *New York Times*.

*Will Lissner was the founding editor of *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, starting it in 1941 while working full-time as a reporter for the *New York Times*. Born in 1908, Will died on March 25, 2000 after a long bout with double pneumonia and a long lifetime of interest in ideas, world politics, and social science. He was a great editor who labored zealously on behalf of the *AJES*, in which his interest never waned, sharing information and offering kind advice to its current editor up to a few months before his death. His contributions were remembered in the obituary that appeared in the *New York Times*, subtitled "Times Reporter Who Specialized in Economics."

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But to get back to 1920. At the time I had a chum, Johnny Keresztesy, who went to Boy Scout meetings with me. He had a sister, a school teacher, who subscribed to the *Freeman*, a weekly literary and opinion journal. Knowing that I was interested in economics and the way the world ran, Johnny began to bring me copies of the *Freeman*. For the first time I learned about Henry George, because the people associated with the *Freeman* were all Georgists, which is to say they were all followers of the theories, insights, and understandings of the American 19th-century philosopher and economist Henry George. George firmly believed that people in a free society could remedy their own problems by cooperation and that competitive capitalism was the ideal economic system, as opposed to monopolistic capitalism. Competitive capitalism was developing at the time and this has become true today.

I was fascinated with what I learned in the *Freeman* and from that time on I became a lifelong Georgist.

Not until I was 25, however, between my studies at several colleges and my job at the *Times*, did I find the time to become a volunteer teacher at the Henry George School in New York City. While I was teaching there Francis Neilson, the Anglo-American essayist and cultural sociologist, asked the school to recommend some person to edit his writings and they recommended me. After meeting Neilson and knowing that he had been one of the founders of the *Freeman*, along with his wife Helen Swift Neilson, Albert Jay Nock, Suzanne LaFollette, and Ben Huebsch, the publisher, I agreed to his request.

By that time the weekly *Freeman* was no longer being published. It had not had a large enough circulation to survive, having used up in four years the two million dollars that Helen Swift Neilson, heiress to the Swift fortune, had provided for it.

Meanwhile, at the *New York Times*, as their economic journalist, I was assigned to reading the leading scientific journals of the social sciences. After a two-year study of such journals I got the idea that what the Georgist movement really needed was a scientific journal in economics, and I asked the Schalkenbach Foundation if they would fund such a journal. They agreed and promised me a grant of \$400. At the end of that year that promise was to cause the first real problem the

Journal encountered, when the Foundation discovered it only had \$200. More about that later.

Before I could embark on the project I had had to get permission from the publisher of the *New York Times*, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, because my name would appear on the *Journal* as editor and the *Times* had a rule that no one could have an outside activity that might leave them open to bribery.

I also had to get the okay of my superiors. I still have some of the papers that went the rounds before reaching Mr. Sulzberger and in my old age they make me very proud. Mr. E. L. James, the managing editor (the top editor), in his memo to Mr. Sulzberger wrote, "Personally I don't see any objection to this. But because his name may show up on the magazine, I am asking you what you think. He is a very high class man" (meaning me). Eventually Mr. Sulzberger not only gave his permission but informed me that I could use office stamps for my correspondence and whatever I needed of office paper.

In my query to Mr. Sulzberger I had told him that the work of the scholarly quarterly magazine in the social sciences I wished to develop would only take "a few hours of my time each week and would in no way interfere with my work in the office or burden me in any way." "I would," I added, "be doing it in my spare time."

Little did I truly realize the work that founding a scientific journal largely by one person would entail. As I had promised I never let it interfere with my work at the offices but I was often glad that I was young and had always needed only about four hours' sleep a night as my mind began to fill with a jumble of all the things that had to be done to get the magazine up and running.

First, of course, I had to define the purpose of the journal. I defined it fairly early as a scientific journal publishing refereed reports, edited in consultation with leading specialists of empirical investigations. Later it was to become written in the first issue of the magazine in the Prospectus as:

The American Journal of Economics and Sociology has been founded by a group of specialists in the social sciences and in moral and social philosophy, in association with men of affairs, to serve as a stimulus to investigation of special types of problems in these fields and as a medium of

publication of such studies. Its interests are confined to problems that gain recognition in the growing awareness of the scientist and the scholar of his added social responsibility in a time of world-wide cultural crisis.

The entire Prospectus as stated in that first issue is much more detailed but before that first issue came out there was much more to be done.

There was, naturally, the need to find and organize a group of scientists and scholars who would be willing to edit and write the articles that would go into the magazine. I chose to ask academicians who were either Georgists or friendly to Georgist ideas. Originally the group consisted of such notables as Harold Hotelling of Columbia University, Raymond Crist of the University of Illinois, Harry Gunnison Brown of the University of Missouri, John Dewey of Columbia University (who was to write the Introduction for the first issue), and Lancaster M. Greene and Mortimer J. Adler of the University of Chicago.

Professor Adler had at that time been researching the organization of an encyclopedia to succeed the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and an amusing story comes out of his participation with the *Journal*. He became so interested in getting articles and subscribers for me that he neglected his work on planning the new encyclopedia and several of his friends frantically wrote to me that they considered it a calamity and could I please do something about it. After considerable thought I composed a letter to Adler in which I told him how much I appreciated all he had done and that it was with deep regret that I accepted his resignation but understood that he had obligations of greater moment. I later heard that my letter confounded Adler since he could not recall offering his resignation which, of course, he hadn't, but my letter did get him back to what he should have been doing in the first place.

From the time I had first conceived the idea of founding a scientific magazine I had been going over in my mind what the name should be. I had not been able to decide. However, when Adolph Lowe's book *Economics and Sociology* came out in England, the book was referred to me by the *Times'* book sectional and as I began to read it I discovered that Lowe was making a detailed exposition of the interdisciplinary approach and a plea for cooperation in the social sciences. Up to that time economists had studied economic problems and sociologists had studied sociological problems. But I had always

believed that Henry George's economics was sociological and that his sociology was economic. I also believed, as Adolph Lowe was arguing, that often a problem transcended the boundaries of just one discipline and had to be solved by an economist and a sociologist in cooperation. (I did not know Adolph Lowe then. He was at that time a refugee from the German Nazi regime, living in England. Later, when he emigrated to the United States and joined the University in Exile at the New School for Social Research where I had been a graduate student, I met him and we soon became fast friends.)

Even before I had finished Lowe's book I knew I had the name for my magazine—*The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*—which the Schalkenbach office and others frequently shortened vocally to the *AJES*.

Money was always a worry in those early days and one of the greatest worries was what the cost of printing the *Journal* was going to be. I asked Leonard Recker, a printer who was also a member of the Schalkenbach board, if he could please find me a good printer who would be willing to print the magazine at a price we could afford. I had a friend who was supposed to take care of the financial details but he became busy with other things and dropped out. Vi Peterson, Executive Director of the Foundation, agreed to take over and become business manager. While still in the planning stage and before we had to pay any bills, Vi had to inform me that although the Foundation had agreed to fund the *Journal* for \$400, it only had \$200 in its coffers for that purpose.

Desperately I began to send out letters about the project to members of learned societies at various colleges and universities, using their membership lists, explaining our project and our struggle to meet publication costs. Members of these societies at Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Chicago immediately responded by managing to acquire from their colleagues and for the universities' library collections about 15 subscriptions each for the magazine. Members from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Cornell also came through by getting us a number of subscriptions.

Friends I had met through my work at the *Times* and when I had been attending or lecturing at various colleges or universities also came through with subscriptions.

Things were beginning to look up.

They were really beginning to look up when Leonard Recker found Business Press, formerly known as Science Press, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, run by Jacques Cattell. The world-famous publication *Science* had been founded at Science Press. Business Press was prepared to turn out the kind of economic journal that we wanted to have and because Cattell became interested in our project he gave us a rate for the first year of publication that would have bankrupted Business Press if it had continued, but it enabled us to get started.

Cattrell had also become interested in the *Journal* because he very much liked the cover, which had been done by Wallace Kibbee.

Kibbee was one of the four most famous typographical designers in the country at that time and he was designing for the Foundation *The Life of Henry George* by George's son, Henry George, Jr. Impressed with his work, I had written to him asking him to design the *Journal*. He had agreed and not only had designed the magazine, front to back, but had drawn the cover and designed the title *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in original lettering, lettering he used only for the *Journal* so that there was never a complete alphabet. So we had a unique cover of which we were very proud.

The printers at Business Press also liked the cover and the whole idea of the magazine and they turned out a perfect job for us.

The first issue of the *Journal* finally came out in October 1941. All of us involved waited eagerly for the reaction. One of the first and important reactions came from Thomas F. Woodlock, editorial page columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* and public relations counsel to J. P. Morgan, then the leading figure on Wall Street. He wrote a column in which he spoke about our project as "this excellent magazine." I asked him to amplify his remarks and he wrote an article we published in Volume 1, Number 3, in April 1942 under the title "Issues in the Quest for Synthesis in the Social Sciences," and we all enjoyed his continued praise.

In all we had what we considered an overwhelming response but I was really not immensely surprised because here was a project endorsed by two of the world's great philosophers at that time, John Dewey, the philosopher of Instrumentalism, and Lord Russell, Bertrand Russell, the philosopher of Rational Inquiry.

Many American economists and sociologists welcomed the new journal, illustrating how willing American scientists are to accept new approaches in their fields. This we found very heartening.

As a matter of fact, soon after the first issue came out we began to receive articles not only from American but from foreign scholars as well and it became clear that it wasn't going to be a great problem getting articles. Actually, because the leaders in the fields of economics and sociology were submitting so many articles, if I had accepted them all much of the *Journal's* available space would have been taken up. Therefore, believing that younger people and minorities weren't going to get a chance to build a publication record that would help them get permanent jobs, after some thought I made a rule that we were going to give younger and minority scholars preference in allotted space. I explained the rule to the veteran scholars and none of them argued.

Early on Lord Russell had told me that if I were ever in need of articles I could use anything he had written unless he was co-author and then he would try to get the other author to agree. His permission was comforting although since we were having much less trouble than we had anticipated I did not want to take advantage. I was still editing Francis Neilson's writings and had used an article from one of his published books in the issue. However, I knew that he was the only cultural sociologist we had practicing in the United States and that anything he wrote would add a dimension to the *Journal* so I asked him for new essays. For a long time he would not hear of it because he had had a very unpleasant experience in his collaboration with Albert Jay Nock when they were both working on the old *Freeman* and he was leery of any possible repetition.

After the first issue came out Neilson had sent me a check for \$2,500 for the *Journal* and told me that another check for the same amount would be sent in six months. I had sent the check back, telling him that what I needed from him was not money but the contribution of articles, that after the first issue had come out we had received a number of new subscriptions and so we no longer had to worry right then about covering publishing costs.

He continued to resist and I continued to ask until finally he broke down and slowly began to send things in.

We had gotten one decided criticism about the *Journal* when the first issue came out: one economist at the University of Pennsylvania made the comment that he thought we were desperately trying to be scientific by using technical terms. When he kidded us about that in public I immediately made a rule that our authors could always use the scientific language of economics and sociology but adroitly had to define it. That was a good rule for it made for greater clarity.

Throughout all the planning and the final publication of the *Journal* I was, of course, still working at the *Times*.

Things went along okay until there came a period when prices were going up and the colleges and universities were going through a budget crunch so they began to sell anything they could in order to add to their endowments. In this period academic publishers saw a chance to make a profit on scientific journals by raising the subscription rates and by charging the authors of scientific reports page charges for printing them. By then the *Journal* was well established but I feared that, with scientific journal subscription rates rising, libraries would have difficulty with their budgets for such journals and would have to get rid of some of these publications. Naturally I was afraid that one of the publications would be ours. I was happy when it turned out that the libraries were not canceling any of our subscriptions. Instead they seemed to be canceling more of the scientific journals that the academic publishers had bought. Nevertheless, we made a special effort not to raise the *Journal's* subscription rate at that time and I refused to establish the practice of page charging authors.

I would like to make clear that these actions did not apply to all academic publishers of that period. I know of one that maintained the highest ethics, JAI Press. JAI Press, although it published and acquired many scientific journals, never tried to make a profit by exacting page charges against authors.

Around this time we had two other problems. The first was the worry about whether we would have our paper supply for printing the *Journal* cut off. America had joined the Allies in the Second World War and paper was scarce. But that worry never happened. The government had a bank of writers, members of the administration in Washington, writing articles about the war and discussing its problems. We were glad to publish these articles and the administration re-

alized that the public's need to know about what was going on in the war was very important.

The second problem we had was not so much a worry as an uncertainty. I wanted to help in the war effort, of course, but I was pulled in two different ways. I didn't know if the government was going to insist on my joining the war effort by going down to Washington and working in the Pentagon, where I would be working long, long hours and would have no time to work on anything else, especially not the *Journal*. I had been given a test for every type of secret clearance except for the Q clearance for nuclear energy and I had passed with flying colors. Immediately the administration offered me a Colonel's commission to become an aide to the Chief of Staff. I accepted the fact I would have to go if they claimed it was necessary.

But the *Times*, like other newspapers, had the authority to overrule any decision by the war department to take any reporter or correspondent away from his or her work, again because of the people's need to know what was going on, and they informed the government that they needed me at the *Times*, that they had spent a great deal of money training me in a number of European languages and that I was assigned to use that knowledge to reach military headquarters abroad through neutral countries so that I could verify communiqués as they were received. The administration had been accepting the versions of any communiqués printed in the *Times* as authentic, realizing that after the war any errors could be corrected, so they agreed to leave me there.

Another wartime assignment I had at the *Times* was to handle the strategy of the war. Not the tactics. That was handled by a professional military historian, Hanson Baldwin. But as part of my assignment I had to go to Canada several times because the strategy of the war was being planned by the allies at the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec. During this period I had been able to continue editing and publishing the *Journal* in spite of the long hours I had to work, but whenever I had to go away I had to edit the *Journal* well in advance so that my absence didn't keep it from coming out. This often proved difficult, though I almost always managed.

One fact that may prove interesting to know is that I was the only American newspaper correspondent at the conference of the British Empire Powers in Quebec in 1943 and, although nobody knew it at

the time, I was the only one given the exact plan to report for the Normandy invasion. The experts on psychological warfare reasoned that the Germans would never believe that the British would let an American report such a plan and would think that it therefore could not possibly be the correct one. The experts were right, so the Allies achieved tactical surprise when they did indeed invade Normandy.

When the war was over the *Times*' correspondent was expelled from Moscow because the Russians didn't like his frank and revealing dispatches. I was assigned to take over Russian correspondence from New York. This meant I had to devote more and more time to my job at the paper. I became so overworked that my good friend Neil Macneil, assistant night managing editor, asked Vi Peterson to come over to his office at the *Times* one evening. He told her that most people acknowledged that I was a genius but that I was so overworked he feared for my health. Couldn't she do something to lighten the burden of the *Journal* for me? he asked.

Vi went back to the office, not knowing what to do. But after much thought she decided to hire a retired school teacher to do the editing and proofreading on the articles that were going into the *Journal*. This worked out very well and was a great relief to me because I really was exhausted. However, for years afterward Vi liked to tell that story, always emphasizing that Macneil had said most people acknowledged that I was a genius. She kept telling it because she knew it always embarrassed me, made me uncomfortable. And she always laughed when she saw my reaction.

In 1960 I met the woman who was to become my wife, Dorothy Burnham. She was a writer and I soon recruited her to take on the job of assistant editor of the *Journal*.

When we married she suggested to me that we try to make the *Journal* outstanding in its field. I was happy to agree and not much later I retired early from the *Times* so we were able to concentrate entirely on the *Journal*. When Dorothy had come aboard, academics were being criticized for writing obscurely in the hope that such writing would make them appear more scholarly. Dorothy abhorred that kind of writing and insisted that the articles we got ready to be printed in the *Journal* had to be written clearly and gracefully, and if they weren't she would edit them until they were.

One day when she was editing an article she turned to me and said

in exasperation, "I think this guy must have gotten his Ph.D. with box tops." I laughed and it became a joke we shared. Every now and again I would tell her, "Here's another article from an author whose Ph.D. came from box tops."

Sometime during the years that followed, a canvass was taken by specialists in economics that showed there were about 350 economic journals in the world. Another study set out to rate these journals annually and we were elated to learn that the *AJES* placed among the first 25, year after year.

As I aged, Tommy Larkin of the Schalkenbach board began to worry about what the Foundation would do if something happened to me and I couldn't go on as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal*. We needed to have someone in the wings as backup, he insisted. Dorothy was asked if she would be willing to take over the office, but she adamantly refused. If she were not helping me on the *Journal*, she said, she preferred to work in the field in which she had last gotten a degree—psychology.

Tommy then suggested that a committee be formed to search for somebody to take over when I retired. This was done and later when we did retire Professor Frank Genovese of Babson College and his wife Eleanor were chosen as our successors.

They did an excellent job of continuing what we had started until they too retired and Professor Laurence Moss, also from Babson College, became Editor-in-Chief.

I have mentioned several ways in which I believe the *Journal* pioneered. It introduced the interdisciplinary approach. It promoted the study of Henry George. It encouraged the study of competitive capitalism as the ideal economic system. It promoted the study of monopolistic capitalism so as to define the types of monopoly of which it consisted. It formed the rule that scientific terms in the social sciences must be defined, adroitly, when they are used. It advanced the idea that academic writing must exhibit grace and clarity like all good writing and the requirement that criticism of scientific reports must be designed to improve them. And, finally, it strengthened the idea that editors of scientific journals should welcome younger and minority scholars.

September, 1999