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Source: *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Oct., 1981, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), pp. 415-425

Published by: American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3486804>

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# Individualism and Institutionalism Revisited:

## *A Response to Professor Bush*

By DAVID W. SECKLER\*

*Criticism does not assume a fully articulated deductive structure: it creates it.*

Imre Lakatos

ABSTRACT. In the book which provoked *individualist/institutionalist* controversy in several journals, including this one, the author emphasized aspects of "muddled" thinking in the work of *Clarence E. Ayres* which he believes has brought forth *neo-institutionalist* contributions that are a "hodge-podge." Neo-institutionalism, he is convinced, is a form of *historicism* in *Karl R. Popper's* terms. *Lord Robbins* is quoted to prove that individualists do not necessarily espouse *laissez-faire capitalism* and extreme *income inequality*. *F. A. Hayek* is a conservative but some individualists are *socialists*. The distinction on which individualists base interpersonal comparisons of *utility* is not between *normative* and *positive* but between science and philosophy; *Thorstein Veblen* never attempted to build a bridge between science and *value*. The real issue between individualists and neo-institutionalists is individualism vs. *collectivism*.

### I

#### Introduction

THE ABOVE MOTTO captures the intent of my book.<sup>1</sup> I have always felt that Individualists and Institutionalists are interested in the same kinds of problems and that a critical exchange between the two schools would, as a good neo-classicist might say, result in a gain to both parties. But until Professor Bush's critical review was presented, I had almost given up hope. I had begun to think that the small section on Ayres had so enraged the institutionalists that they had lost their reason.<sup>2</sup> Bush does not like that section either, but

\*[David W. Seckler, Ph.D., is project specialist in resource management and economics, the Ford Foundation, on assignment from the department of economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo. 80523; his current address is the Ford Foundation (India Office), 320 East 43d Street, New York, N.Y. 10017.] What follows is a comment upon two articles of Paul D. Bush, " 'Radical Individualism' vs. Institutionalism, I: The Division of Institutionalists into 'Humanists' and 'Behaviorists,' " *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (April, 1981), p. 139ff. and " 'Radical Individualism' vs. Institutionalism, II: Philosophical Dualisms as Apologetic Constructs Based on Obsolete Psychological Preconceptions," *ibid.*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (July, 1981), p. 287ff.

*American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October, 1981).

0002-9246/81/040415-12\$00.75/0

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rather than indulge merely in expressions of indignation he advances some interesting arguments to which I can reply. Professor Bush's commentary stands on its own as an important contribution to the literature and I do not feel obliged to cover each and every point he raises. There are, however, three specific problems I would like to briefly address in the following pages: 1) Clarence E. Ayres and "Neo-Institutionalism"; 2) interpersonal comparisons of utility; and 3) Collectivism vs. Individualism.

## II

### Clarence E. Ayres and Neo-Institutionalism

PROFESSOR BUSH EXPRESSES the hope that if there is a next edition of the book I would give Ayres a more expanded treatment. I can say that I have already tried and failed and that is the reason for the truncated version in my book. I simply cannot develop a logically coherent presentation of Ayres' thought. If the institutionalists wish to fault my treatment of Ayres it should not be on grounds of deficient scholarship for I have read and reread Ayres more than I like to think about—but perhaps, if they wish to take this line, on grounds of deficient mental abilities.

In the introduction to the chapter on Ayres and Copeland, there is a very careful disclaimer: "No attempt is made in this chapter to give a comprehensive or balanced view of the works of either Ayres or Copeland . . ." <sup>3</sup> I explained that I was only going to present one side of Ayres and that there is, consistent with the eclectic thesis regarding institutionalism, at least one other Ayres. Having spent a lot of time documenting two strains of thought in Veblen, I thought that it would be boring to do the whole exercise over again with Ayres. This may have been a mistake. The result, I admit, is something of a monster. As Breit says, it is, ". . . an Ayres totally unrecognizable to me," but Breit also understands the context in which I placed this monster. I was trying to show, as he says, that Ayres was "a bit muddled." <sup>4</sup>

One can find in Ayres many highly perceptive statements showing that he is not only the monster I presented him as. For example, there is an excellent passage on the way in which science and technology provoke social change:

. . . this power is manifested in two ways: by the changes which technological development effects in the physical medium with resulting institutional obsolescence and eventual change, and by changes which scientific enlightenment effects directly in the ways of thinking by which institutions are ideologically sustained. <sup>5</sup>

I could not agree more, but I may also cite the immediately preceding

sentence in order to show the dilemma faced by an outsider in reconciling Ayres' various statements into a logically coherent whole. "The power which ideas exert by virtue of being correct is a function not of mind over matter but of technology over institutions in the long-run process of social change." This statement is either incomprehensible as it stands or it negates the last phrase of the above paragraph. I enter these two statements as further evidence that Ayres was indeed "a bit muddled."

I am grateful for Bush's statement, ". . . the correctness of Seckler's view that American institutionalist literature still remains, for the most part, an incoherent hodgepodge of disparate intellectual styles and tastes must be conceded."<sup>6</sup> I believe this "hodgepodge" is largely due to Ayres. If the book accomplished no more than to make institutionalists realize that there are some real intellectual difficulties in their position, that it should go through a "critical purge," I would be content. Bush and Breit should do some internal housecleaning.

I am more convinced than ever that the "neo-institutionalism" represented by Ayres and his disciples represents a form of historicism. Certainly the grand resolution of all those old "mind-numbing dualisms," together with the fact that ". . . the institutionalist finds that human values exist in the public realm of observable human action . . ."<sup>7</sup> has more than a faintly historicist ring. When one knows the immanent direction of history it is quite easy to separate the "technological," which contributes to that movement, from the "ceremonial," which frustrates that movement. I think this historicist *continuity of movement* is quite clearly what Ayres has in mind when he says, "For every individual and for the community the criterion of value is the continuation of the life process—keeping the machine running."<sup>8</sup> The collectivist nuances of neo-institutionalist social theory, to be discussed below, also have a decidedly historicist ring.

If there were to be a second edition of my book, I would say that while old institutionalism does not represent the position of the German Historical School, neo-institutionalism represents the position of the German Historicist movement—and then simply leave the result up to Veblen, who despised this philosophy, and Popper, who refuted it.<sup>9</sup> But Ayres also had the benefit of Veblen and of several decades of criticism of historicism, and his is a very weak-kneed and illusive historicism indeed. While I think I understand what Ayres and his disciples are after, it would be a very trying exercise to recapitulate their arguments, especially since none of the neo-institutionalists, having solved these problems of dualism and objective value, tells us what the resolution precisely is—what is the answer to "free-will vs. determinism"

(other than “a little of both, thank you”<sup>10</sup>), and examples of “good” and “bad.”

Lord Robbins once gave me a piece of advice which I here pass on to the world. I gave him an Ayresian chapter to review while still in my institutionalist mode, and he said, “My dear Seckler, you should understand that, with the possible exception of Immanuel Kant, clear writing is a function of clear thinking.” I like to think I was driven from institutionalism to individualism simply in a desperate attempt to write clearly.

Thus much as I appreciate Bush’s suggestion, there is very little in the book I would change. However, I would like to see some objective analyst examine the exact nature of the changes in philosophy brought about by the Dewey-Ayres influence in institutionalism. I believe these changes were substantial, and to the detriment of the school as a whole. I sometimes even wonder if the neo-institutionalists can legitimately claim Veblen as an ancestor. W. S. Gilbert, once commenting on a performance of a Shakespearean play, said it provided a wonderful opportunity to test who Shakespeare really was: all one had to do is disinter the various candidates and see which one had turned over in the grave! Reading various neo-institutionalists’ pronouncements on Veblen, I am tempted to suggest a similar test; but Veblen had the foresight to assure himself a more restful end.

If the book is ever reprinted, I do promise to correct those spelling errors which so delighted my critics—and to correct a terrible typographical error in a syllogism which they, characteristically, failed to detect.<sup>11</sup> If Breit and Bush would read their Veblen a little more carefully they would find that proper spelling is not a property of the instinct of workmanship, as they say,<sup>12</sup> but rather, like etiquette, a strictly ceremonial function attesting to a life spent with nothing better to do. To correct this dreadful instance of “deficient scholarship,” I quote the master in full:

As felicitous an instance of futile classicism as can well be found, outside of the Far East, is the conventional spelling of the English language. A breach of the proprieties in spelling is extremely annoying and will discredit any writer in the eyes of all persons who are possessed of a developed sense of the true and beautiful. English orthography satisfies all the requirements of the canons of reputability under the law of conspicuous waste. It is archaic, cumbrous, and ineffective; its acquisition consumes much time and effort; failure to acquire it is easy of detection. Therefore it is the first and readiest test of reputability in learning, and conformity to its ritual is indispensable to a blameless scholastic life.<sup>13</sup>

## III

## Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility

IT IS NECESSARY to begin this section by disabusing the institutionalists (excepting Bush) of one of their fondest fantasies: that individualists espouse *laissez faire* capitalism and extreme inequality of income. De Gregori goes so far as to suggest that individualism is little more than an elaborate philosophical facade in defense of these positions—or, as he says, the “hidden agenda” behind individualism.<sup>14</sup> To this allegation I can do no better than cite Lord Robbins:

. . . any contention that the great followers of this tradition, Sidgwick, Marshall, Pigou, Robertson—and here Keynes would not wish to be excluded—were not interested, according to their lights, in the redemption of poverty must be regarded as either deliberate misrepresentation or a lack of perceptiveness calling imperatively for very sympathetic psychiatric treatment.<sup>15</sup>

Later, in defense of the legacy duty, Lord Robbins observes, “. . . the distribution of wealth will be broadened; and, from the point of view of a Liberal political economist, *this is, in itself, a desirable objective.*”<sup>16</sup>

In fact, there is no “party line” on socio-economic policy among individualists. While F. A. Hayek’s “neo-conservatism” is well known, I am quite sure that there are individualists who are also socialists. For my own part, I despise all ideologies, whether of right or left, and subscribe to Popper’s philosophy of piecemeal social engineering to serve objectives eloquently captured in the following quotation:

Man has created new worlds—of language, of music, of poetry, of science; and the most important of these is the world of the moral demands, for equality, for freedom, and for helping the weak.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, if ever there was evidence of “deficient scholarship,” this neo-institutionalist delusion that individualism is tied to an egalitarian bias must surely be it.

Thus it is extremely important to understand that Robbins’ famous denial of the validity of interpersonal comparison of utility is *not* an argument against an egalitarian distribution of income. It is a denial that an argument either for or against such a distribution of income can be made in terms of economic science.

While Bush understands Robbins’ position perfectly well, other institutionalists, wrapped in conspiracy theories, seem incapable of seeing the point. Bush does not accept the normative-positive distinction, but he does not

simply dismiss Robbins' argument on those grounds. Instead, he advances a far more interesting *critique*: how can Robbins deny the validity of inter-personal comparisons of utility on grounds that they are not objectively observable, yet retain those subjective observations which, as Bush perceptively observes, *separates* individualists from logical positivists? Robbins' reply is twofold.

First, you *cannot* tell if one person gains more or less than another person in *any* transaction because you cannot measure cardinal utility functions.

The theory of exchange assumes that *I* can compare the importance to *me* of bread at 6d. per loaf and 6d. spent on other alternatives presented by the opportunity of the market. And it assumes that the order of my preferences thus exhibited can be compared with the order of preferences of the baker. But it does *not* assume that, at any point, it is necessary to compare the satisfaction which *I* get from the spending of 6d. on bread with the satisfaction which *the baker* gets by receiving it.<sup>18</sup>

Second, statements based on subjective observations which have behavioral consequences *are* refutable by *modus tollens*; immediately following the famous "gulf-fixed" sentence Robbins says,

The proposition that the price of pork fluctuates with variations in supply and demand follows from a conception of the relation of pork to human impulses which, in the last resort is verifiable [read refutable] by introspection and observation. . . . we can watch how [people] behave when equipped with currency and exposed to the stimuli of the pig-meat markets.<sup>19</sup>

I believe that these citations from Robbins provide an adequate response to Bush's very interesting criticism, but I would like to spend a few more moments in an attempt to put the general issue raised by Robbins in perspective. Robbins was himself disturbed by the interpretation of the first edition of the *Essay*: "It has been held—in spite of activities which I feared had become notorious—that I had urged that economists should play no part in shaping the conduct of affairs beyond giving a very prim and restrained diagnosis of the implications of all possible courses of action."<sup>20</sup> He addresses this misconception, interestingly enough, by an institutional explanation.

I agree, too, that by itself Economics offers no solution to any of the important problems of life. I agree that for this reason an education which consists of economics alone is a very imperfect education. I have taught so long in institutions where this is regarded as a pedagogic axiom that any omission on my part to emphasize it further is to be

attributed to the fact I assumed that everybody would take it for granted. All that I contend is that there is much to be said for separating out the different disciplines which are germane to social action in order that we may know at each step exactly on what grounds we are deciding.<sup>21</sup>

For my own part, I would change the “normative-positive” distinction to the distinction between science and philosophy, in Popper’s terms. Then it seems quite obvious that normative questions lie within philosophy, not in science. But it is equally obvious that by assigning these problems to philosophy they are in no way diminished in importance or intellectual content. Value judgements are not simply a matter of expostulation, as so many economists seem to think. Some propositions are refutable, some are not. Why institutionalists are apparently driven to “elevate” ethics to “science,” rather than simply argue values on their legitimate philosophic grounds, is a propensity which can perhaps be only explained in terms of some invidious misconception they must have between “science” and “philosophy.”

While on this subject, I must say that Bush’s implication that “. . . Veblen (along with Dewey) . . .” showed the way to bridge the “gulf-fixed”<sup>22</sup> is one of the few places where he lets his enthusiasm obstruct his reason. Veblen understood the gulf-fixed perfectly well and *never* let himself fall into this trap. I challenge Bush or anyone else to find a statement in Veblen where he attempts to design a bridge between science and value. I think that neo-institutionalists have simply transformed Veblen’s literary device of the ceremonial-technological distinction, a dagger designed to twist in the American pragmatic soul, into a rather asinine philosophic dictum. That is why I did not follow this line through Veblen, as Bush thinks I should have—it is Dewey, not Veblen. In Veblen it is a red herring, and Veblen would enjoy knowing that he even ensnared his putative disciples in this small joke.

But having now criticized the institutionalists for their particular approach to the problem of value, I would like to say that I agree with them on the need for a more sophisticated *philosophical* theory of value in economics and for a more sophisticated behavioral theory, whether scientific or philosophical. I hope someday to expand on these two themes, but this is not the time or place.

#### IV

#### Individualism vs. Collectivism

I GATHER FROM COMMUNICATIONS with psychologists that behaviorism is no longer so popular as it was when the book was written. If true, I am of course



delighted. But I have never considered behaviorism as important an issue as collectivism, for the differences between collectivism and individualism are much more subtle and deceptive than in behaviorism. It is difficult to decipher whether a particular statement comes from one or the other theoretical backgrounds. For example, the statement, 'Man is a product of his social environment,' can be interpreted either individualistically or collectivistically, and without additional information it is impossible to know which is which. The individualist would interpret this statement in the rather straightforward, commonsensical way that man is largely defined in terms of his knowledge, values, and beliefs, and that he obviously learns most of this material from parents, teachers, friends and other individuals of his "social environment." Of course, he also learns from his own experience and from creative thoughts of his own mind, but most of what he knows, and therefore is, is acquired from other people.

Now what does a collectivist mean by this statement? I had a very difficult time while writing the book in answering this kind of question because the institutionalists never really commit themselves to a genuinely collectivist position. Gruchy, for example, talked a lot about "Holism" but never really put it to work.<sup>23</sup> While this shows eminent good sense, I was forced in the book to combat shadows in the cave on this issue, with dragons miraculously transforming themselves into windmills at the first signs of adversity. The pursuit of collectivism (or behaviorism, for that matter) through the self-defensive thicket of institutionalism *is* a rather Quixotic adventure.

Here I would like to cite briefly a real, rigorous and bold collectivist for whom I have a great deal of admiration: Emile Durkheim. I do not know if institutionalists would subscribe to Durkheim's position, but as O'Neill has said, individualism and collectivism are ". . . issues on which it is essential to have an opinion."<sup>24</sup> Even if the institutionalists want to "take a little of both, thank you," I would be interested in knowing how they propose to do it. Durkheim's position is outlined in the three following propositions as compiled by Richard Appelbaum,

- 1) "Whenever . . . elements combine and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements but in the totality formed by their union.
- 2) "Let us apply this principle to sociology. If, as we may say, this synthesis constituting every society yields new phenomena, differing from those which take place in an individual's consciousness, we must, indeed, admit that these facts reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts, *i.e.*, its members. They are, then, in this sense external to individual consciousness. . . .

- 3) "Here, then are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness."<sup>25</sup>

Durkheim thus logically proceeds from reasonable premises to those strange, supra-human entities which somehow control individual behavior in accord with their own ". . . ways of acting, thinking, and feeling . . ." Danto aptly describes these collectives as "social individuals," similar to the private individuals of individualism.<sup>26</sup> As Danto observes, in both cases the "individuals" are irreducible wholes: social individuals are no more reducible to private individuals than are private individuals reducible to electrons. For this reason, Danto says, he can see very little to choose between the two kinds of "individuals." Now I can no more refute the existence of social individuals than I can refute the existence of angels. My argument is that Occam's Razor can be used to excise "social individuals" as unnecessary in the explanation of the behavior of "private individuals."

When I said that individualism, "is individualistic because it contends that all institutions or 'social collectives' can be explained in terms of the individuals alone,"<sup>27</sup> I thought it would be obvious that I meant without these "social individuals." Instead, some critics have chosen to interpret "alone" in the sense of "by themselves," from which basis they can accuse me of an absurdly atomistic conception. But as I went to great pains to explain in the same chapter, it is the *interaction* between individuals which constitutes a society; that all social behavior is reducible to individuals *and* their inter-relationships. As I said, ". . . an institution can only exist with two or more people in interaction . . ." and "purposes together with procedures determine individual behavior."<sup>28</sup> I could hardly be more clear, or less "atomistic."

I think a great step forward in the "part-whole" debate has been taken with the substitution of the phrase "inter-action phenomena" for the word "whole."<sup>29</sup> Interactions are explicitly part-relation phenomena: in order to explain interactions one must be able to understand the parts and the relations between the parts. Given this, one can then get at two facts which seem to provide the impetus to collectivism: 1) there *are* emergent properties of interaction phenomena; 2) not *only* is there "upward causation" from part-relation to interaction phenomena, but also "downward causation" from interaction phenomena to part-relation.

Perhaps the simplest illustration of both of these propositions is a market price. 1) A price is certainly an interaction phenomenon: it cannot exist with only one individual—it requires the interaction of at least two buyers and sellers. 2) Once a price exists, it enters into the determination of the behavior of individual buyers and sellers. Now while it is true that you cannot explain behavior of individual buyers and sellers at any point in time without in-

cluding in the explanation prevailing market price, it is also true that you cannot explain price without reducing it to the behavior of buyers and sellers and the rules by which they interact. The infinite regress that appears to open here may be conventionally stopped at any point in time. It is simply a matter of where one fixes the initial conditions.<sup>30</sup> Thus while I would not deny that my behavior cannot be fully explained except by including my institutional affiliation, I do deny that my institution is anything other than the product of individuals and their relations in that institution. Durkheim went wrong, in my opinion, not in his postulation of interaction effects, but in his assumption that these effects are not reducible to individuals and their relations. I do not contend that all interaction phenomena are reducible, even in principle. There are mysteries in physics I am not qualified to evaluate. But I do contend that all so-called "collectives" or "wholes" in the social sciences are reducible—excepting, of course, private individuals.

## II

### Finis

WITH THESE FEW ADDITIONAL WORDS I think I have said about all I wish to say about Institutionalism *per se*. My interest in schools has declined as my interest in specific arguments has increased. If there is another exchange with Professor Bush, I hope we can discuss our real intellectual differences more and our differences over the interpretation of others less. Professor Bush's criticism has caused me to re-examine my own position more than I have been able to indicate here; I have learned something in the process, and for that I am grateful.

### Notes

1. Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," p. 130, footnote 4, in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds. (*Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 91–95. The book: *Thorstein Veblen and the Institutionalists: A Study in the Social Philosophy of Economics* (Boulder, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1975).

2. For example, William Breit, Thomas R. De Gregori, Allan G. Gruchy, and David Hamilton, "Four Reviews of Seckler," in *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December, 1976), pp. 943–57. Also, Louis Junker, "Genuine or Spurious Institutionalism," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (April, 1979), p. 207ff, and my reply in this *Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January, 1980). By way of contrast, see Kenneth Boulding, Richard H. Day, Don Kanel and Peter Dörner, "Three Reviews of Seckler," in *Land Economics*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (February, 1976), pp. 127–34.

3. Seckler, p. 68.

4. Breit, p. 944.
5. C. E. Ayres, *The Theory of Economic Progress* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 289.
6. Bush, p. 13.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. Ayres, p. 230.
9. See Seckler, Ch. 7.
10. Bush, p. 17. Bush notes that this approach appears to me "woefully obscurantist," and he is absolutely correct.
11. Seckler, p. 81. The minor premise should clearly be, "2. It is impossible to predict future knowledge. . ."
12. Bush, footnote 8.
13. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), p. 399.
14. De Gregori, p. 950.
15. Lord Robbins, *Political Economy, Past and Present: A Review of Existing Theories of Economic Policy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), p. 103.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
17. Karl R. Popper (from *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) cited as a motto by Bryan Magee, *Karl Popper* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1973).
18. Robbins, pp. 138–39.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
20. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
21. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
22. Bush, p. 23.
23. Allan G. Grunchy, *Modern Economic Thought: The American Contribution* (1947) (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967), especially pp. 19–20.
24. John O'Neill, ed., *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 3. This book is an excellent overview of the issues between individualism and collectivism.
25. Quoted from Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1964); in Richard P. Appelbaum, *Theories of Social Change* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1970), p. 4.
26. A. C. Danto, "Methodological Individualism and Methodological Socialism," in O'Neill, pp. 312–37.
27. Seckler, p. 79.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
29. See the very interesting discussion of this subject in Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain* (Berlin: Springer International, 1977), pp. 14–35.
30. The institutionalist's use of the word "process" to solve all problems is a particularly obscurantist element in their literature. There are many different kinds of process and they do not bother to explain which kind they recommend—except "Darwinian," whatever that means, natural selection? But I do think they are attempting to get at an important truth: that in human affairs the "transformer," the individual, changes as a function of the transformation, by learning. Some elegantly simple models of this kind of cybernetic process are found in W. Ross Asby, *An Introduction to Cybernetics* (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1966). If this is the kind of "process" institutionalists imply we can agree; if not, what kind do they mean?