

# *The* AMERICAN JOURNAL *of* ECONOMICS *and* SOCIOLOGY

Published QUARTERLY under grant from the Robert Schalkenbach  
Foundation in the interest of constructive synthesis in the social sciences.

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VOL. 9

JULY, 1950

No. 4

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## What is "Equality of Opportunity"?

By FRANCIS NEILSON

### The Importance of Definitions

SOCRATES WAS A STICKLER for clear definitions. Who can read "The Republic" and fail to enjoy his method of making his friends explain the meaning of the words they used that day they were gathered at the Piraeus, when they began their search for justice? The quest would have been fruitless if, at each step taken in the discussion, he had not insisted on clarifying the meaning of leading terms. Cicero, too, was strict about the necessity of defining economic and political ideas in a way so simple that his hearers understood what was meant. His declaration on natural law is an example of the care he took to make his meaning clear.

Marcus Aurelius was another who asked for precise definition. His advice is worth quoting:

Make for thyself a definition or description of the thing which is presented to thee, so as to see distinctly what kind of a thing it is, in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety, and tell thyself its proper name, and the names of the things of which it has been compounded, and into which it will be received. . . .

These are precepts to be followed if we would know the exact meanings of terms. From the men who laid them down so long ago we gather that conversation was no less difficult then than it is now. Indeed, Plato's work, "The Republic," will forever remain the outstanding example of the confusion in men's thought and how hard it is to make them understand that words and phrases must have particular meanings, if the time given to controversy is not to be misspent.

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A few years ago, at a dinner party, held at the house of a physicist—a Nobel prize winner—one of the leading sociologists of the country asked, “What is to take the place of the capitalistic system?” The question was addressed to an economist, but before he could reply, the physicist put in, “What *is* the capitalistic system?”

The rest of the evening was taken up with an argument about the meaning of the phrase “capitalistic system,” and so different were the ideas of the people at the table about it that the time passed without the original question being answered.

Socrates was perhaps the only philosopher who succeeded in making his disputants realize that they would get nowhere in their controversy about justice unless they agreed upon clear definitions of words. All through the centuries, down to our own day, we have had countless illustrations of the futility of attempting to determine what men mean by their leading terms unless, at the outset of the discussion, they agree upon precise definitions of the principal concepts.

Roger Bacon, the great Franciscan mathematician of the thirteenth century, said: “The mixture of those things by speech which are by nature divided is the mother of all error.”

How strange it is that so little is done in the institutions of learning to enlighten the students about this necessary study. It is fundamental to a proper understanding of discourse. Yet, some of our modern philosophers, politicians, and economists reveal in their writings that they have not given due consideration to these matters. They are often as guilty of defects in expression as men were at any time.

One has only to think of the term *laissez faire*, as it has been used since the days of Archdeacon Cunningham, to know that this is so. The industrial system, often called the capitalistic system, is frequently described as one of *laissez faire*. However, when it is pointed out that there has never been, in any political civilization, a period of no restriction, thinking men realize that the term is misapplied. A free industrial system in a complex civilization has never been known, and since the days of the so-called Industrial Revolution, neither Great Britain nor any European country has been without restrictive laws which interfere with production and commerce. The confusion in the minds of students, caused by the misuse of this term, is responsible for much of the misunderstanding so widespread among Fabians and many sociologists.

#### The Physiocrats and Laissez faire

THE PHYSIOCRATS, who advocated an economic system of laissez faire, were a clear-thinking body of men. Henry Dunning Macleod, in his book, "Elements of Economics" (1881), described their doctrine and the industrial goal they had in view. It would serve a useful purpose if our mentors would prescribe a course in economic fundamentals that would include the study of the system advocated by the Physiocrats.

In his very interesting work, "The Growth of English Industry and Commerce in Modern Times" (2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1903), Dr. Cunningham repeatedly uses the term laissez faire, but nowhere does he explain what it really means. François Quesnay announced the doctrine in his work, "*Le Droit Naturel*" (1768), an inquiry into natural rights. It goes to the basis of man's urge to satisfy his desires and needs with the least exertion. It is a demand for freedom to produce the commodities that are necessary for his well-being. One of the clearest statements to be found upon the idea of the Physiocrats is that of Henry George, in "The Science of Political Economy" (N. Y., Robt. Schalkenbach Foundation, 1938), Book II, Chapter IV, in which he translates and defines the motto of Quesnay: "*Laissez faire, laissez aller*," as "A fair field and no favor."

It was not until long after the enclosure acts had depopulated the countrysides of England and driven men into the towns that the term laissez faire was applied to industry. But at no time since the discovery of coal and steam has there been such a condition as "a fair field and no favor." Restrictive industrial laws and the taxation of wealth had been in vogue since the days of the Stuarts. However, the so-called capitalistic system could not have raised its grimy edifices so speedily (when the machine driven by steam superseded the old village system of handicraft), had not enclosures supplied the labor market with an abundance of men who had no alternative. Indeed, it was a denial of laissez faire which produced a capitalism that thrived on low-paid labor.

Quesnay and his colleagues did not envisage industrial conditions such as those that sprang into being after the discovery of coal and steam. He died in 1774, and the inventions of Watt, Hargreaves, and Arkwright were then in their infancy. It was not easy for those born fifty or sixty years later to find a perspective that would enable them to view the sequence of events that led to the Hungry Forties and the destitution rife in the manufacturing towns. Moreover, Quesnay could not know that an economic revolution was progressing covertly in England, with the object of despoiling the free laborers of the common fields and turning them adrift to crowd into urban districts in search of work.

According to Frederick Clifford's "A History of Private Bill Legislation" (2 vols., London, 1885), 3,511,814 acres of land were enclosed by private bills in the eighteenth century. But this figure is only the extent of the areas declared in the bills. As for enclosures and depopulation by force, such means for territorial aggrandizement had been taken ever since the days of John of Gaunt.

Quesnay's economic theory of dealing with the first factor in production, land—the passive factor, the created one—was philosophically sound, and in it lay the attribute of freedom to produce, equality of opportunity.

This period—the century and a half from 1700 to 1850—deserves a new, thorough treatment, now that we have so much fresh material, much of it discovered by John Hammond. But it will serve no educative purpose to survey it from our present-day vantage point. The recorder might begin with James E. Thorold Rogers' book, "Six Centuries of Work and Wages," and trace the thread of this most terrible of all revolutions, stretching from the end of the thirteenth century, when a serf held twelve acres of arable, down to our own day, when the great mass are landless wage slaves.

In a review of Henry Steele Commager's book, "The American Mind" (Yale University Press, 1950), Joseph Wood Krutch quotes from it:

What populism and progressivism, the new freedom and the New Deal, meant in terms of political philosophy was the final repudiation of *laissez-faire* and the explicit recognition of government as a social welfare agency.

Here in America an industrial system of *laissez faire* has not existed since the birth of trade unionism. Protective tariffs, factory laws, social legislation, and trade union demands for higher nominal wage and fewer working hours are contrary to all the ideas that were held by the Physiocrats. It is not a question of whether these expedients were necessary to ameliorate the economic distress. The consequence of such legislation shows clearly that as more of these measures are put upon the statute book, more are required to bolster them. Nothing has been done to provide man with an alternative to entering the labor market, and we have seen the dollar he earns (when he gets a chance to work) shrink in purchasing power. Moreover, all the labor-saving aids produced by science and invention tend to make life harder for him.

#### **The Meaning of "Radical"**

ANOTHER WORD EMPLOYED loosely by politicians and editors is "radical." If the members of the famous Radical Club of Boston could know how it is used today, they would be amazed. Every member of that unique

society was an individualist, whether he were a Whig, a Democrat, or a Republican. How this term has been twisted to cover the nostrums of Socialists and Communists no one pretends to say. In England and in this country it was in use long before the days of Marx and Engels.

The Oxford Dictionary gives a satisfactory definition of it, and there is no excuse whatever for its being misapplied. It means "root," and an English Radical of the eighteenth century was a man who desired the restoration of the constitution; the abolition of landlordism; and the re-establishment and reaffirmation of "the law and custom of the land."

This claim appears occasionally in philosophical and political tracts since the days of Edward the Confessor, though it is scarcely noticed by the Radicals of the school of Grote, Mill, and Molesworth. Thomas Paine was a Radical, and so was Thomas Jefferson. Only one who is not particular about his definitions could use it to designate political and social nostrums that are as superficial as those in vogue today.

#### **Equality of Opportunity—Economic, Political, or Social**

HOW OFTEN WE NOTICE now in the speeches of politicians and in the essays of men directing the fortunes of our institutions of learning the phrase "equality of opportunity." A former President of this country frequently inserted it in his fireside chats, but it was left to the discretion of the listeners as to what he meant by it. Whether he referred to it in a social sense or a political or economic one, none could gather from the context in which it was embedded.

What is implied by it would certainly make a great difference to the understanding of those whose opportunity to earn a decent living is thwarted by restrictive laws. For so many people it seems to be somewhat like the blessed word Mesopotamia—high sounding and of merely decorative purpose; a literary boss or a bit of chiselled foliage for a capital.

Many years ago a popular archbishop delivered a sermon in which he called for a system of equality of opportunity. Afterwards, some of his parishioners wanted to know what he meant by the phrase. He explained that he used it in an economic sense, a desire for the people to have access to land, which is the basis of their existence.

The controversy that arose from this explanation impressed the archbishop with the fact that those in his see who, in their domains, held sway over natural resources were not inclined to part with their acres. Needless to say, the archbishop dropped the subject and returned to sermons which in no way disturbed the economic notions of his well-to-do parishioners.

A newspaper commenting upon the controversy said that it was better for church dignitaries to stick to sin, schism, and squalor. Within the church there could be very little controversy about these daily problems.

In an interview published in *The New York Times Magazine*, March 5, 1950, Dr. A. W. Griswold, the new president of Yale University, said:

By democracy I mean a political society in which the greatest possible measure of justice implicit in the phrase *equal opportunity* is combined with the greatest possible measure of freedom and encouragement for the individual to develop his own talent, initiative and moral responsibility. . . .

Here we find it in a context which gives us the impression that the speaker has a definite idea of what the phrase signifies, and perhaps he took it for granted that there would be no doubt in the mind of the reader as to its application. He may have thought no one would so misunderstand the use to which he put it as to imagine it had a political or social significance.

In a democracy where adult suffrage is established, we are supposed to be on a basis of equality of opportunity, so far as voting goes. Here there is no such privilege as that which was enjoyed by the plural voter in Great Britain up until a few years ago. One adult, one vote, is the basis of the franchise in this country. But after the voting is over and the candidates have been elected to the legislatures, the equality of opportunity of the elector ceases to be a determining factor, and through lack of further interest the legislators are left to themselves to conduct the affairs of the nation. The daily papers are full of instances of privilege, nepotism, and graft, and the investigating committees organized to deal with abuse are so many that it is difficult to sustain interest in their proceedings. Therefore, it might be said that the electors' equality of opportunity in political affairs comes to an end when the poll closes on election day.

Now in social affairs there cannot be equality of opportunity for all in a democracy. In the first place, it is not in the nature of man—nor, indeed, in that of woman—to desire it. The first difficulty would be in determining from which stratum the move should be made—from below, up, or from up, down. It is only necessary to walk through the neighborhoods of a medium-sized town and notice the places where the various sections of the community live to be convinced that social equality of opportunity is impossible under this system. There are supposed to be no class distinctions in the land of the free. That may be so in theory, but it is certainly not so in practice.

Some time ago a critic of the system remarked that only at baseball games, race meetings, and prize fights does one see the classes mix on a

democratic basis. In the main, this is true, and to a certain extent it is true of such sporting events in Europe. Yet, we have our special enclosures and sections in grandstands for those who can afford to pay high prices for their seats. Money talks, and though we despise such social divisions as upper classes, middle classes, and lower classes, we realize that the purse has much the same significance everywhere; the amount of income only too often denotes the social line of demarcation between one section of the community and another.

#### The Meaning of Justice

PRESIDENT GRISWOLD TELLS US he is in favor of "the greatest possible measure of justice implicit in the phrase *equal opportunity*." What makes his declaration somewhat unique is that he associates the term justice with "freedom and encouragement for the individual to develop his own talent, initiative and moral responsibility."

There have been notions just as confused about the meaning of the term "justice" as there have been about the phrase "equality of opportunity." I presume Socrates would say, if he were at Yale, that equality of opportunity was synonymous with justice. But who is prepared to create a State such as Socrates had in mind? Some years ago I made a composite definition of justice as it is described in "The Republic":

Justice is the institution of a natural order in which a man can produce food, buildings, and clothing for himself, removing not a neighbour's landmark, practising one thing only, the thing to which his nature is best adapted, doing his own business, not being a busybody, not taking what is another's nor being deprived of what is his own, having what is his own, and belongs to him, interfering not with another, so that he may set in order his own inner life, and be his own master, his own law, and at peace with himself. ("The Eleventh Commandment," N. Y., The Viking Press, 1933, p. 82)

These ideas may be gained from the debates that took place on the occasion of the festival of Bendis, the Thracian Artemis. The event—almost forgotten now—was one of the most important recorded in history, and it would be well for those who are interested in a bureaucratic State to return to "The Republic" and learn once more about the ideas held by wise men centuries before the beginning of the Christian Era. It would take a book of many pages to follow the lines of thought inspired by Socrates.

Think of the work of the jurisconsults of Rome! In the "Institutes of Justinian" it is laid down that "he is just who gives to each what belongs

to him." The Fathers of the Church saw to the heart of this idea and clearly differentiated between land and property. Down through the Dark Ages, into the Middle Ages, and as near our time as Richard Hooker and Joseph Butler, thinkers have expressed themselves in the terms set forth by Socrates.

However, we live in a workaday world, and we seem not to be interested in philosophical abstractions. We are practical people, and much of our thought is given to the making of the hydrogen bomb and the question of who will drop it first. Science has taken possession of the field of ideas, and now the physicists together with the laymen are victims of the political system in which we live, for the present.

It is to be hoped that President Griswold will have a fair field and no favor, and we shall watch with deep interest his pilgrimage of peace in a society that is in sad need of his assistance.

#### Natural Law

PHILOSOPHERS AND JURISTS, since the days of Plato and Cicero, have interpreted natural law in an economic sense, and their commentators—at least from the time of Aquinas to John Locke—have promulgated the idea that man has a right to use the earth, which is necessary for his subsistence. Equality of opportunity, therefore, means nothing less than equal rights to use land because man is a land animal and cannot live or work without it.

There should be no doubt of this in the mind of a cultivated American because when this Republic was founded, many men expressed themselves clearly upon this matter. St. George Tucker and John Taylor followed the Lockian tradition closely and expressed their notions of natural right in the same downright manner as Coke and Blackstone. Tucker says: "All men being by nature equal, in respect to their rights, no man nor set of men, can have any natural, or inherent right, to rule over the rest."

It would be well for some of our latter-day exponents of economic and political affairs to return to the writings of the men of the Revolutionary era. An excellent work for students is "American Interpretations of Natural Law," by Benjamin Fletcher Wright, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1931). Though it may be late in the day to do anything of a practical nature to restore economic rights, it would do no harm if educators of influence in our institutions of learning renewed acquaintance with the thought of men who laid the philosophical basis for the structure of this Republic.



## Accretions and Confusion

A FASCINATING STUDY for a man who thinks and writes is to notice the accretions of definitions given to simple terms since Johnson compiled his dictionary. It is difficult to keep pace with the various shades and meanings that creep upon a word like ivy on a wall. The more we learn, the more need for a lexicon.

Some years ago I received from the great-nephew of Archbishop Trench a very unusual present—a copy of the twenty-seventh edition of "On The Study of Words" (1st ed., 1851). The Archbishop wrote it just about one hundred years ago, and when I was a boy, scholars in the higher forms were reminded of it frequently in the courses in English literature.

Alas, it is out of date, and only philologists would derive pleasure from a study of it. We live in an age when great masses of people so little understand the metrical beauty of the King James Version of the New Testament that it has to be rewritten. It is a sad commentary on the schooling now given to the people, for it should be remembered that for several generations the poor spelled out the sentences and memorized many of them. What was understood then by the poor who, in a great measure, had to educate themselves, cannot be read now with understanding by those who have had the benefits of higher education.

The interview of President Griswold in *The New York Times* gives hope of a better day. He certainly expresses himself freely. As the head of an institution of learning in this country, he is to be welcomed for the courage revealed in this proclamation. To announce a desire to initiate a "measure of justice implicit in the phrase *equal opportunity*" presages a new life for the university whose future will be under his guidance. If he will now dissipate any doubts as to the significance of the terms he uses, he may succeed in a mission to make us "pacemakers in a free world."

I would remind him of the closing words Trench wrote to the preface of his book:

. . . A meditative man cannot refrain from wonder, when he digs down to the deep thought lying at the root of many a metaphorical term, employed for the designation of spiritual things, even of those with regard to which professing philosophers have blundered grossly; and often it would seem as though rays of truth, which were still below the intellectual horizon, had dawned upon the imagination as it was looking up to heaven. Hence they who feel an inward call to teach and enlighten their countrymen, should deem it an important part of their duty to draw out the stores of thought which are already latent in their native language, to purify it from the corruptions which Time brings upon all things, and from which

language has no exemption, and to endeavour to give distinctness and precision to whatever in it is confused, or obscure, or dimly seen.

How we are to become "pacemakers in a free world" is not clearly explained. No one would say the world is free at the present time. Indeed, it would be hard to convince a laboring man that he is free to take a line that differs fundamentally from the one prescribed by his government or by his union. Our actions in this country are circumscribed, not only by the greatest bureaucracy the world has known, but by the injustices of the system of taxation, which makes equality of opportunity a goal that lies far below the horizon.

Before we can change the systems of States in Europe and Asia, we must alter the conditions that hamper our efforts here to make ourselves free in an economic sense. But how this is to be done by communities that have no knowledge of fundamental economics is a conundrum that cannot be answered. Although in the newspapers day after day we read about economics, we do not gather that the writers have the slightest idea of first principles.

Economics—housekeeping—is an elastic term, but it has been stretched so much since the days of Marx that the men who founded this Republic would not recognize it. An advertisement in the business section of a newspaper recently offered schooling in the "economics of bookkeeping and auditing."

This is an instance of how far we have departed from the root meaning of the words we use. Therefore, if we are to understand one another, it is necessary to clear away the accretions that have gathered about terms, so that the confusions of thought will be dissipated and men will know what is meant by the appeals made to inspire them in an effort to reach a goal of economic security.

*New York*

### *Cottage Industries in Bombay*

THE GOVERNMENT OF BOMBAY in India plans to set up a finance corporation later this year to assist in the establishment of small-scale and other cottage industries. Its primary purpose would be to grant loans to handicraft and cottage industries, but it would not be precluded from giving assistance to larger industries like the sugar and cement industries. Why the sugar and cement industries cannot get credit from the established private institutions is not explained. The Indians had better watch out or the cheap government credit will go, as in the United States, to politicians in an unholy alliance with businessmen.

W.L.