
REVIEW

Championing Economic Tradition

*William Coleman, **Economics and its Enemies**, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002*

*Reviewed by **Geoff Bertram***

William Coleman clearly thinks anti-economics is a bane. In this he is reciprocating the sentiments of the authors his book describes: anti-economists think economics is a bane. With the battle lines thus drawn up, no quarter is to be given. For a reviewer, the issue is how effectively and accessibly Coleman has managed to identify, target, and defeat, his chosen intellectual enemy.

This is a rather nineteenth-century sort of book. It exhibits vast erudition about a literature that is shrouded in well-justified obscurity, combined with excursions into philosophical discourse and commentary on a wide range of issues in politics and ideology. It is beautifully written, in elegant, clear, well-rounded prose - yet ramshackle in overall structure, like an attic crammed with relics and junk as well as the odd family treasure.

Relics and junk is probably the best overall description of the literature reviewed by Coleman. He has undertaken the task of scouring through three centuries of writings by authors both prominent and long-forgotten, to find examples of 'anti-economics'. By anti-economics Coleman means opposition to the 'great Tradition' of mainstream economic writing, from Adam Smith to 'Hicks and living persons'. He does not, however, include in his sample all critical perspectives on that Tradition. He means only criticism motivated by the desire to destroy the economics enterprise as such. Anti-economics, Coleman explains (p.8), 'amounts to a wish to destroy economics'.

The volume of writing encompassed by this essentially negative definition is vast, varied, and inevitably not internally-consistent. Right-wingers paranoid about the French Revolution blamed the physiocrats and Turgot. Nineteenth-century supporters of slavery and labour discipline rejected Smith and Mill. From the Left, Marx and Hobson assailed orthodox economists as defenders of capitalist exploitation and imperial oppression. Nationalists, from List through the German Historical School and on to the modern development economists Balogh and Myrdal, rejected the universalist basis of classical and neoclassical economics. Stalin largely obliterated Russian economics (whereas Hitler and Mussolini were pragmatically content to coopt any economists willing to serve their ends, without entering into theoretical engagement with them). Nineteenth-century Romanticism, epitomised by Coleridge and Wordsworth, assailed the notion that

rationality could supersede emotion in explaining the human condition. Modern environmentalism rejects the idea of putting a price on nature. Moralists from Rousseau and Carlyle on have rejected the notion of a positive social science free of normative furniture. Vested interests throughout the centuries have opportunistically attacked 'textbook economics' whenever market liberalisation has threatened their rents. Renegade economists such as Schumacher (and the rather surprisingly cited Blaug, Leontief and Mathews) have given comfort to anti-economist crusaders. Anti-semites both Right and Left have portrayed economics as a Jewish conspiracy. And so on.

Coleman's guidebook moves breathlessly from one potted summary to the next, seeking to build up an overall picture in a manner reminiscent of the pointillist paintings of Seurat — hundreds of points of contrasting colours arrayed on the canvas in such a way that when the observer stands back, there is a clear picture. This book, however, is not a Seurat painting: at a distance, it does not resolve into a clear, intelligible picture. What becomes apparent instead is a strange tension between Coleman's scholarship and his repeated personal sallies to do battle with anti-economists of one sort or another.

Coleman clearly is impatient with, and anxious to engage and defeat, numerous contemporary critics of economics. He presents his case with the urgency of a liberal intellectual engaged in a fully-contemporary struggle against illiberalism and anti-rationalism of Right and Left. But the great weight of scholarly exegesis and criticism in his book is directed at long-dead writers rather than identified present-day authors. To be sure, a few contemporary writers receive occasional brief attention in passing. Alasdair McIntyre rates a line on p.131 (missed by the book's index), and John Ralston Saul gets a two-line quotation (p.223) and is the target of one scathing footnote (p.239). Clive Hamilton receives a casual backhand acknowledgement on pp.114-115, but no direct attempt to draw blood.

Overall, although presented as living present-day entities, the major schools of anti-economic thought are represented in this book by protagonists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it is on those writers that Coleman directs his most withering fire, though he clearly expects these one-sided encounters to give courage to modern-day defenders of the faith against the anti-economics infidel.

Coleman's own scholarly work has been so focused on the past history of economic (and anti-economic) thought, that it has seemed entirely natural to him that a well-documented criticism of Necker, Scrope, Coleridge, Carlyle, Ruskin or Schmoller provides sufficient ammunition to see off the attack of a present-day campaigner against economics as the ideological tool of globalisation, racism, environmental destruction, positivism or any other detested 'ism'.

It is true that anti-economics attitudes of mind are found 'from the eighteenth century to the present day', as the dust jacket proclaims. But the book would serve its ostensible purpose better by devoting less attention to deservedly-forgotten propagandists of two hundred years ago, and more to the current

manifestations of anti-economics in books and journals circulating today among literate, politically-active people.

The book suffers also from a definitional problem of circularity, and a related problem of sample selection bias, that force one to ask why it was worth writing and publishing in this form. Coleman's depth of scholarship, and his authoritative command of the extensive literature he reviews (a 31-page bibliography in small typeface containing 800-odd references) are never in doubt. The circularity problem arises from his characterisation of anti-economics as (p. 231-232) bad criticism: 'our objection to anti-economics is not that it is criticism of economics, but that it is bad criticism of economics'. Bad criticism, by definition, is easily confronted and defeated, and there's the rub. The book's chosen targets are those critics of economics who have conspicuously failed to get their act together and who are, as a result, easily caught in the open by Coleman's relentlessly selective quotation of their sillier claims. The resulting spectacle, alas, belongs to the genre of Christians-fed-to-the-lions. Only those who lust for the sight of blood per se, without regard to the merits a more sympathetic reader might uncover, will really enjoy reading the book right through.

Sample selection bias follows from the definitional position. The more heavily-armed and seriously accurate critics of the Tradition in economics are either by-passed or re-cast as allies. T.W. Hutchison, for example, is listed in the bibliography but not, so far as I could see, mentioned in the text. John Maynard Keynes is elegantly subsumed into the Tradition, on the grounds that he was not motivated by the desire to destroy the economics enterprise as such. The same fate befalls John Stuart Mill. Anti-economics, Coleman explains (p. 8), 'amounts to a wish to destroy economics' — an essentially unreasoning destructive motivation, which automatically excludes the majority of serious intellectuals who have engaged with economics on its own terms.

Critics whose work has had constructive effects, forcing mainstream economists to change their ways and pursue new lines of enquiry, are consequently excluded from Coleman's study regardless of their ex ante motivation, leaving only critics who have been not only unconstructive in intent but also unsuccessful in eliminating or moving economists themselves.

This sample selection bias makes for sometimes dull reading, since the most effective and interesting criticisms of any scientific research programme are those which, in the long run, either command respect from its practitioners or are successful in overturning the mainstream paradigm itself. Coleman's subjects on the contrary are intellectual failures — would-be revolutionaries whose revolutions fizzled out.

Inevitably the acid test for Coleman's approach is Marx. Unlike Mill and Keynes, Marx cannot be dealt with by subsuming him into Coleman's elastically retrospective definition of the Tradition. Yet it is not really clear that his intention was to destroy economics, albeit he undeniably gave short shrift to those he disliked. Marx's apoplectic invective against bourgeois apologetics lends itself well to Coleman's technique of allowing his subjects to convict themselves out of their own mouths; and Marx's failure to overturn the Tradition is obvious enough.

But does this amount to sufficient evidence to convict Marx for ‘bad criticism’ and for a desire to destroy economics as a discipline motivated by the quest for scientific status? Coleman, one suspects, is uneasy on this score, and ultimately resorts to the rather disappointing ad hominem stratagem of including Marx in a list of anti-economists afflicted with clinical signs of mental illness. Under the heading ‘madness and psychological inadequacy’ (pp. 228-230) we find Marx (who ‘can only be described as mentally afflicted’) thrown into the company of Friedrich List (‘a manic-depressive’), Ruskin (‘a grossly disturbed human being who fell conclusively into madness in 1878’), Thomas Carlyle (‘nausea, chronic constipation and depression’) and Arnold Toynbee (‘died at the age of thirty subsequent to a mental collapse’).

Admittedly, Coleman concedes, Mill and Keynes also suffered nervous breakdowns, but since those two have been elevated to the pantheon of economists rather than relegated to the anti-economist rabble, they are excused: ‘whatever mental ill-health there is in economists there is no comparison to that among anti-economists.’ Here in particular Coleman’s book stumbles, for precisely the same reason as Marx’s furious diatribes missed their mark. The temptation to descend from careful forensic dissection of the arguments advanced by one’s chosen opponents, to engage in the heady excitement of muck-raking abuse, turns out too strong in the end. Coleman’s desire to destroy anti-economics is as transparent as the anti-economists’ desire to destroy economics. The tension and escalating verbal violence of a marital squabble ensue.

The result is overkill. The economics profession has benefited greatly from its serene ability to get on with its own project, largely oblivious to the insults and rage hurled against it by those for whom the economics paradigm is a bane. Coleman has broken ranks to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the critics — but by selectively engaging the easiest targets, by failing to resist the temptation to appear intemperate and intolerant in his treatment of those targets, and by the self-indulgently tendentious tone of the philosophical discourse in the middle chapters, Coleman fails the tests he himself lays down in his final page: ‘the cultivation of [the realm of criticism] does not spell an adversarial relationship between the critic and the subject. A judge is not, properly, an adversary of the judged.’

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