

The Evil Economics Does

with special emphasis on the history of late 20th century economics

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First draft: burn after reading

Greed and conspiracy

In the celebrated movie of 1987, *Wall Street*, Gordon Gekko played by Michael Douglas makes a passionate speech to a room of 400 Teldar Paper stockholders. He pronounces that

I am not a destroyer of companies, I am a liberator of them. The point is, ladies and gentlemen, greed is good. Greed works, greed is right. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms, greed for life, money, love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind – and greed, mark my words – will save not only Teldar Paper but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA...

The capitalist economy is often represented in film and fiction, by deception and greed. The present economic crisis saw “Gekko” comeback as an ubiquitous noun to stand in for Wall Street firms. In October 2008, Fox let it be known it was planning a sequel tentatively titled

“Money Never Sleeps.” The plot had an aging Gekko saving the financial system. The imagination of corporate capitalism is either triumphant or apocalyptic.

In these storylines imaginings of “economists” and “economics” are rare. In film fiction, they have made few appearances, and the notable exception is the portrayal of John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). Yet, even Nash, Nobel laureate in Economics, is principally the mathematician. His reclusive and abrasive personality fits well with contemporary expectations of genius, from *Good Will Hunting* (1997) to *Proof* (2005). Absent from fiction, the economist appears in popular culture in the historical documentary and in journalism.

My aim in this paper is to survey some historical writings that reflect on the role and significance of economists in contemporary societies. I want to cover popular and scholarly histories of economics, textual and audiovisual materials.¹

Historiography as Self regard

There is no one way to discuss the writing of history and delimit the purview of “historiography”. One approach is the survey. Roger Backhouse (2004) and Craufurd Goodwin (2008) examine the extensive body of historical research on economic ideas and writers. Both authors establish that for most of their past, historians of economics have sought to complement or inform the questions of economists. It was only in the late 1960s that the history of economics became institutionalized as a separate field with its own set of problematics.

The history of economics’ habitation in the economics profession has shaped the historiographical controversies of the last 30 years. Margaret Schabas (1992) called for a break away from economics for the sake of joining the history of science community. She recognized the muteness of the current cohabitation and saw the possibilities of engaging new audiences. Her challenge was to wrestle historical study away from the values and concerns of economics. E. Roy Weintraub (1999) drawing on analogy with the history of science, speculated on alternative meta-narratives giving unity to the history of twentieth century economics.² Attempts to

¹To protest about the historical mistakes of Hollywood is a respected practice (see Toplin (1996)) hence to survey historical writing suspending distinctions of authority and the distinction between scholar, journalist and entertainer may appear suspect.

²Weintraub (1999) identified the types or themes: inductivist heroes, critical rationalism, revolutions, on the shoulder of giants, science studies, taking the history of economics seriously, socialization, reflexivity and economic history.

re-enter a conversation with economists have continued, such as in the piece by Mark Blaug (2001) in the “soft” journal of the American Economic Association. Yet, these attempts seem doomed to failure as Weintraub’s (2007) analysis reveals.

The debate remains lively with a new generation taking sides, although unfortunately only to reinstate old positions (Palma 2008, Moscati 2008). My essay contributes to this evolving historiographical literature only by negating its terms. While these controversies have been discourses from the history of economics community making choices about future directions, I have no prescriptive ambitions.³ While these contributions have contrasted histories of economics with the writings of economists (orthodox and heterodox) on one side and the history of science on the other, I look over the academic distinction to compare narratives both academic, popular and journalistic. So while existing historiographical discussions have been characterized by self-regard, I want to look outward.

Histories as texts, texts and interpretative communities

My purpose is to survey historical writing that deals explicitly, or tacitly, with *the role played by economists in contemporary society*. I look at histories as texts and narratives. I will here disregard deliberately the context of authorship (Barthes 2002). I do not want to separate narratives on the grounds of being authored by scholars or journalists or documentarists. Nor do I want to probe the intentions of the authors. What I lose in established categories of authorship I gain in examining afresh what I see as interpretative context. I will make the argument that narratives are performed in stable communities of authorship and readership. Read and re-read in these communities, the texts stabilize into genres and themes (Jameson 1989).

Genre is a term in wide use in film and media studies, but in literary studies it has had recent misfortune.⁴ The fundamental reference of criticism is Jacques Derrida’s (1980) argument

³The community can be loosely defined by membership to one or all of the associations: History of Economics Society, European Society for the History of Economic Thought, Japanese Society for the History of Economic Thought; or/ and by publication in the journals: *History of Political Economy*, *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, *History of Economic Ideas*.

⁴Although now somewhat tired by much examination there are a few schemes I am tempted to endorse in looking at historical scholarship as narrative. Hayden White (1973) famously distinguished the rhetorical styles of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony to describe historical narratives. The descriptors give an interesting frame to look at texts but one that doesn’t fit my immediate intentions.

that genres in the literary studies tradition, are external structures that do violence to the texts and their essentially unstable nature. Less nihilist is the position endorsed by Michel Foucault (2002). He calls for the analysis of text as belonging to “discursive formations” that will often cut across conventions such as fiction, history, science, or philosophy. Although a text may never be confined to a single class it can still belong to overlapping classes that permit the text to circulate in culture.

My point of contact and departure from this debate is Stanley Fish’s 1976 study of the *Variorum Commentary* on Milton’s Poetry. He urges us to abandon the assumption that “meaning is embedded in the artifact.” One is invited to transfer the responsibility of interpretation and meaning away from texts and into readers. And more importantly to conceive of “interpretative communities”, as “made up of those who share interpretative strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.” (Fish 1976, 483).

The artifact therefore does not have one reading, or belong to one genre, but elicits many meanings. I cannot assume the context and the interpretations to be preset but must uncover them by following the conversations prompted by the original texts. In this essay, these will be written reviews. While reporting on the multitude of meanings, I will focus primarily on the representations of the economist in society.

All the narratives I examine were published since 2000 and addressed the post World War II period.⁵ I pick out five examples that will assist me in my argument, of which three are books, two are documentary films for television. Of these five, three were made for the mass audience, two for a specialist readership.

Commanding Heights: economists and “global thinkers”

The oldest artifact of this study is *Commanding Heights* a book by Daniel Yergin (1998), later a documentary by the USA’s Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (Yergin 2002). The narrative exists as a DVD box set, as a book and as an award winning website.

The documentary, like the book, is a global economic history narrative.⁶ Starting in the early

⁵As Backhouse (2009) recently argued, the Second World War and Cold War offer a particularly rich period to examine the mutual influencing of economics and politics.

⁶Good overview of 20th century world economic history, June 26, 2002 by macktheknife, in Amazon.com, [http:](http://)

twentieth century it follows the main economic and social events of the century playing out a battle of ideas to culminate in the debates about globalization that dominated political debate in the late 1990s.

The documentary was diversely interpreted as economic history, economics, history, education, and ideology. It seems to have been widely used in classrooms, as when a reviewer of the book wrote: "I have to read it for my economic geography class."⁷ For those that saw it as a classroom tool, or even as entertainment there was not much dispute over the content, it was only by fear of uncritical watching that this narrative became a concern. As one reviewer stated "Commanding Heights - both the PBS website and video is a good basis for ongoing discussion. The only question will be then is whether the people / you who watch it will question it or take it as gospel. It is easy to get caught up and distort our vision in the momentum of thinking a certain way."⁸

The most striking ambiguity of this piece was expressed in its ideological intentions. Some saw expressed the welcomed victory of Chicago economics, as when stating "The "Chicago School of Economics" celebrates its wisdom, models and planning in country after country. (...) Keynes may be the 'father' of market economics, but Keynes is a short-term perspective."⁹ Others saw this slant as ideological bias, to be unwelcomed. One self-confident student wrote disappointed,

Being a young student myself, I have been curious of the economic history of the world, and such curiosity led me to read the "Commanding Heights". I am impressed ...but at the same time, disappointed at how it completely discredits Keynesian economics. I do believe in capitalism and free market, however, many countries such as the United States have benefited from the theories of John Maynard Keynes, especially during the Great Depression. The Commanding Heights is biased and is evidently in favor of globalization and of a free market economy.¹⁰

[//www.amazon.com/review/RV710MOUKIGC/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm](http://www.amazon.com/review/RV710MOUKIGC/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm).

⁷Great for my economic geography, February 14, 2009 By Nehemie Gentillon http://www.amazon.com/review/R7CQZEU72C8GJ/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

⁸A good introduction, but remember to use your brain, July 10, 2004 By W. Chen "circusoflife" http://www.amazon.com/review/R2C9UGMPEQ12YD/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

⁹Global Economics, May 9, 2008 By Scott M. Kruse "Biophysical Geographer", http://www.amazon.com/review/R3FSLKL0AL872I/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹⁰A One-Sided Look at the Multifaceted Economies of the World, May 17, 2005 By K. Blanco "the curious and open minded.", http://www.amazon.com/review/RKJW7HKIG123X/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

Criticisms from the left targeted the book and documentary as cheerleading globalization.¹¹ Others saw the narrative as evenhanded, when remarking that the book “documents the story of the unfortunate but understandable rise of socialism in post World War II Europe and how it fell out of favor. The story of the rise of individual initiative and privatization is wonderful to me, however, it might cause pain and anxiety to others.”¹² At least one reader saw it biased towards Keynesians, as in the remark that “If I have any complaint with it, it would be it seems too short and slightly biased towards “Keynesian” thought. But, some bias is expected in such endeavors, and perhaps my own libertarian ideology has biased my own judgment here?”¹³

What is interesting for my purposes is that *Commanding Heights* plays the life stories of two economists at the core of this grand battle, as one stated “the two grand economic schools in the west which were the products of John Maynard Keynes and Frederich Von Hayek.”¹⁴ As one reader saw it “links and relationships between the various economic theories and the real changes in the world.”¹⁵ The central idea is that even though economists were not decision makers, they commanded history by the power of their ideas. “How can a couple cranky economists in their ivory towers change the world? *Commanding Heights* provides the answer, with a sweeping view of 20th century economic history.”¹⁶ In *Commanding Heights*’s representation systems of thought conceived by economists will inform the decisions of democracies. Economists’ engagement with policy debates being one of the most important forces shaping the global economy.

Mises: economist as “monument”

Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism was authored by Jörg Guido Hülsmann, and published by the Mises Institute in hardback, and available for download free. Biography is a familiar genre

¹¹ Good overview of ONE view of the evolution of economic theory, June 1, 2006 By Amazon customer http://www.amazon.com/review/R10EN3FP0U72X2/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹² Great Book - Let’s Remember the Lessons Learned, September 10, 2002 By Craig Matteson, http://www.amazon.com/review/RYG03TK9GZYQ0/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹³ A testament to the power of ideas, November 20, 2003 By Mark Frost “Economist and Philosopher” http://www.amazon.com/review/R66X3V6ZFXW5V/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹⁴ A Very Interesting and Unfinished Story, August 9, 2004 By G. Grisham “grmissouri”, http://www.amazon.com/review/R1PL5T90SUWXJ7/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹⁵ I learned so much, March 7, 2009 By Charlotte Ann Hu, http://www.amazon.com/review/R1QXQ47LYWCP8B/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

¹⁶ Exciting treatment of economic history, February 13, 2005 By therosen “therosen” http://www.amazon.com/review/R4603SXTPY3BS/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

that in most bookshops occupies several shelves. Besides proving a valuable entry point to history of science writing (Söderqvist 2007), scientific biographies can do moral work by presenting exemplary lives (Skidelsky 1987). This is one of the themes that this text suggested to its readers: the economist's principled and unending battle against the evils of socialism (e.g. Gibson (2008)). As Ira Katz puts it: "Mises the person is an inspiration through his moral and physical courage, and his persistent and overriding quest for truth." (Katz 2007) This fortitude is well emphasized by the subtitle of the book.

The interpretations of this biography are generally prefaced by tributes to the "monumental" effort of the biographer, an European scholar who finally unearthed the full life of Mises. The book packs 1143 acid free pages and is lavishly produced. Interesting, the Amazon.com reviewers reassure fellow shoppers that the font is big and there is plenty of footnotes, so one can run quickly through the text.¹⁷ Most of these reviewers are pleading for the uninstructed to read the book. But I found no evidence of blank slate readers.¹⁸

Readers of this text were generally well informed on Mises's life and work and could see in detail what was novel in the text, namely the portrayal of Mises's standing in Austria, prior to his more well documented activities in the USA. Such comments focused on his status in Viennese academia and European economic thought (Gordon 2007); or his role as "senior policy analyst for the Vienna Chamber of Commerce" and as commentator in the Austrian media (Ebeling 2008).

Beyond the particular interests of the readers, the main thrust remains that this is the biography of a man that was more than himself. The bulk of the readers highlighted the importance of the text to introduce the audience to the man and his ideas. A propos, many reviewers spend most of their text summarizing Mises's contributions to economics and political thought or proposing additional reading to make sense of the Misesian message (Epstein 2007). This is writing and reading towards an end, as stated by one online reviewer: "When the majority of individuals knows who Mises is (if not understands him completely) and when this biography reaches a best-seller list, we can rest assured that individual liberty will be preserved." (Wolff 2007) Mises, his life, his biography, is a means towards a higher truth.

This representation of the economist is not unlike that of *Commanding Heights*, the "intellectual" that has a piercing outlook on political events and their deep economic meaning. What is

¹⁷See the reviews in <http://bit.ly/3kS05G>.

¹⁸One reviewer explicitly recognized that the book was for the "neophyte" (Lexington 2008).

interesting here is that Mises was not a man of affairs, that had the ears of leaders. The nobility of Mises, and of this kind of public intellectual, was that he battled in the margins, unknown, devoted to a knowledge that was beyond him. Hence, both the biography and the man are the “monument” standing for something greater.

Machine Dreams: economist as “cyborg”

Philip Mirowski’s *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science*, was published in December 2001. Of the texts that I elected to study this is perhaps the one most weeded to scholarly debate and hence the one less amenable to wider readership. As evidence to this, some of the reviewers saw a doctrinal element at play in Mirowski’s writing, a critique of mainstream economics in favor of alternative approaches (Samuels 2002, Grüne-Yanoff 2004). One noted, “Not content with being a historian, our author also dons the prophets mantle.” (Gordon 2002). Another reviewer summarized the prophecy as “conceive of markets as machines, as tools designed to achieve our goals. They don’t replace people, but become part of their lives. (. . .) This is the machine dream of Mirowski” (Yonay 2004, 627).¹⁹

As many reviewers saw it, the criticism was achieved by playing John von Neumann as the “hero” of the book, while undermining John Nash and other familiar names of the standard story (Backhouse 2003; Weintraub 2004). Many reviewers recalled the narrative of the blockbuster *A beautiful mind* (2001) for contrast. One online reviewer summarized that “Von Neumann thought neoclassical economics was nonsense, and made no secret of that opinion. As a result, many post-war American economists have tried to write him out of history. One fruit of their effort was the beatification of John Nash as the patron saint of game theory, a process that began in the 1980s.” (Sutter 2006)

At the core of Mirowski’s text is the notion of cyborg. The concept seems to have been elusive to most of his readers. One confidently defined, “the cyborg is recognized as a hybrid of human and machine elements, blurring the distinctions between living and non-living, the natural and the social, reality and simulation.” (Agar 2003). But one of Amazon.com, top 100 reviewers, protested the use of the word. He picked up the book with the expectation “it might shed some light on how intelligent machines are being used either to develop new economic theories or to understand the vast amounts of empirical economic data currently available.” but

¹⁹ *Machine Dreams* received a wealth of reviews, meta-reviewed by Lawrence A. Boland (2006).

discovered something very different (Carson 2004).²⁰ To some “cyborg” was a term of rhetorical abuse, not least for Ken Binmore, one economist that was criticized in Mirowski’s book (Binmore 2004). To others it reflected the asociability of economists, or their lack of “simpathy” according to David Levy (2004). For most it was a marker of the funding of economic research by military institutions during and after World War II (Davis 2004, Klaes 2004). Roger Backhouse (2003) questioned if there was a moral indictment in highlighting the military connection, but the majority of readers avoided that interrogation. Ultimately, for its readers, the book was not about condemning economics because of its funding.

Thus in reading Mirowski, a dual image of the economist appears, shrouded in the notion of the cyborg. Looking back the cyborg is a construction of the postwar military establishment, designed and hence intentionally not the work of economists. Economics is not economist made. But the cyborg, in Von Neumann’s dream, is also an unfulfilled possibility that many readers wrote as the future of economics. Economists are hence a dim subject of social and political life, but one that still has the potential to rescue itself from a dead end.

The Trap: economist as “brainwasher”

Adam Curtis is an English film-maker with an growing portfolio of provocative documentaries about British political and social history. His documentary *The Trap* was a three part, three hour piece, broadcast on March 2007 on BBC 2.

The reviewers of *The Trap* all contextualized this film series, within Adam Curtis’s more acclaimed and polemical work. In 2004 he surprised many by arguing in *The Power of Nightmares*, that Al-Qaeda was an invention of Western governments to usurp civil liberties and justify policies of war and an unrelenting state of emergency. By parallel, *The Trap* is also read as denouncing an unlikely invention: contemporary notions of “personal freedom.” Curtis is seen as enveloping Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and the 1960s counterculture in the same historical process (Harkin 2007).

Economists enter the narrative by way of Game Theory. They offer the tools that in the narrative shape a reform of psychiatric practice and the National Health Service. The set of characters includes Friedrich Hayek, John Nash, and James Buchanan. The Cold War paranoia, and

²⁰A similar criticism came from David Warsh (2002).

Nash's personal schizophrenic torment is argued to be genetic in game theory and all its applications. Later, the reform of psychiatric diagnosis based on questionnaires, and the reform of the National Health Service guided by performance targets and incentives, illustrate the use of economic, individualist worldview that impoverished human relations and public life (Burkeman 2007).

The economist is here, unintentionally, a brainwasher. The economist's worldview of self interested and amoral rationality is seen as a fiction that once implemented in state institutions oppresses the everyday person. The shadowy economists, likened to psychopaths in their narrow view of human nature, reshape public debate and culture.

Unlike *Commanding Heights* that had the demeanor of an tool for teacher and self-educated public, this documentary takes on a confrontational tone. It is a "single voiced television essay" committed to a partisan position. All interpreters of *The Trap* found it in different degrees excessive and provocative. Yet, *The Trap* did not generate as much polemic as Curtis' earlier work. It hasn't appeared as a DVD, and is posted for free on You Tube, where on occasion bloggers will discover it and suggest it to the uninstructed.²¹ I want to speculate that the reduced readership of *The Trap* my suggests its limited appeal as a narrative. For its intended audience, the cast of characters is not well known, and the idea of game theory as a form of unintended brainwashing somewhat remote from everyday experience.²² In fact, only one reader engaged with these subjects explicitly and he was an LSE economist and philosopher (Steuer 2007).

Shock Doctrine: economist as "torturer"

The third and final book I would like to consider is Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. While *Machine Dreams* had 3 reviews on Amazon.com and *Mises* had 12, *Shock Doctrine* had in early June 2009, 383 reviews. Klein's book was also reviewed by all

²¹Such as the Socially Socialist blog, <http://sociallysocialist.wordpress.com/2008/09/30/and-you-thought-911-was-a-conspiracy/>, and One Neat Thing a Day <http://oneneatthingaday.wordpress.com/2008/09/14/9-14-08-the-trap/>.

²²Philip Mirowski is one of the principal informants of the documentary, and the notion of paranoia is present in *Machine Dreams*, one might see *The Trap* as an interpretation of that book. Moreover, we could also argue that Mirowski's representation of the economist does not survive well in the public space given Curtis's limited polemic success.

major newspapers, and she was subject of a couple of magazine profiles.²³

Since the success of her 2000 book, *No Logo*, Klein has become a political force in militant debates about globalization, the corporation and economic and social history (Macfarquhar 2008). The book denounces a conspiracy. Klein's writing is described as a piece of investigative achievement, "to the point of investing over \$200,000 of her advance payments in research operations, building a virtual academic institute in order to get the goods on such unsexy free-market gurus as the late University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman" (Allemang 2007). Thus in most media outlets, the book was represent principally as a journalistic denunciation, even though one that was acknowledgedly polemic and often tied to her biography as a red diaper baby. It was journalism with a reddish hue.

The message of the book is that under the cover of true crisis, periods of mass disorientation and suspension of democracy, market ideologues push through anti-popular economic reforms of privatization and cuts in public services. As the *Washington Post* review put it

The imposition of radical, Milton Friedmanesque free-market capitalism, [Klein] claims, often takes place when the targeted population is reeling from some exogenous shock: either a foreign invasion, like the "shock and awe" takeover of Iraq in 2003, or a natural disaster, like the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, or even an economic meltdown, as occurred in Southeast Asia in 1997 and Argentina in 2001. (Tharoor 2007)

In this text, an economist becomes an adjective. The centerpiece of Klein's book is the involvement of economist Milton Friedman and the University of Chicago's Economics Faculty in the regime of Augusto Pinochet in 1970s Chile (Jahr 2007). Economics, dictatorship and corporate takeover blend in this narrative.

Readers find the book objectionable for many reasons. Some protest its portrayal of Latin America,²⁴ many found it propaganda for a socialist cause, most of the strongest denunciators disapproved of the portrayal of Milton Friedman as arch-conspirator and ultimately executioner of economic torture.²⁵ It is interesting however that these objections occurred mostly in the

²³Naomi Klein made also several appearances on cable tv, the Colbert Report, Charlie Rose, The Rachel Maddow Show, Real Time with Bill Maher, to name a few.

²⁴Anticapitalist propaganda and clueless about Argentina, May 1, 2008 By Mariano Muruzabal, http://www.amazon.com/review/R1XEHF0IY3K1XN/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

²⁵Read This Book If You Enjoy Malicious Drivel, December 26, 2008 By Freedom Lover, <http://www>.

online forum and not in the newspaper reviews. And in some readers the book provoked even more angered reactions against the main characters, such as “If absolute power corrupts absolutely, then Friedman and Hayek’s absolutist views on the world corrupted them and their followers so absolutely that they refuse to acknowledge the great violence they have done to the goal of human liberation.”²⁶ Joseph Stiglitz reviewing for the *New York Times*, remarked

There are many places in her book where [Klein] oversimplifies. But Friedman and the other shock therapists were also guilty of oversimplification, basing their belief in the perfection of market economies on models that assumed perfect information, perfect competition, perfect risk markets. Indeed, the case against these policies is even stronger than the one Klein makes. (Stiglitz 2007)

Christopher Hayes (2007) only complained that Klein was addressing the wrong economist and that she should have picked Hayek.

The representation that endorsers of Klein’s book sustain is of the economist as a anti-democratic expert, either at the command of corporate interests or deeply illuded about the nature of the economy and society. In its starkest terms, the economist, Friedman, is a torturer and the imagery is dyspotic. It is the world of “Gekko.”

Historiography as regard for others

I have here looked at different media that in their own way tackled the problem of economists’ role in contemporary societies. My work was that of reporting the interpretation of the readers of these narratives and making sense of them by selecting themes and showing divergences. I have (mostly) held back from interpreting their interpretations. I want here to make some sense of these disparate findings and suggest that the narrative representations of economists in contemporary society are beset by enduring cultural anxieties about the practice of historical writing and reading.

[amazon.com/review/R3CW9PE4Q3ZRFW/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm](http://www.amazon.com/review/R3CW9PE4Q3ZRFW/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm); A REAL Disaster, May 10, 2009 By Damien Littré, http://www.amazon.com/review/R241D7D6Q2HHSQ/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm; Be warned, September 26, 2008 By Patrick R. Gibbons “Gibby”, http://www.amazon.com/review/R3FJ7JOSEODSWS/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

²⁶Reveals the anti-democratic underbelly of neoliberal economics, October 7, 2007 By K. Cousins, http://www.amazon.com/review/R33J104MS3U6QC/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm, and too harsh to quote, Alternate History of Our Lifetimes, August 26, 2008 By Giordano Bruno, http://www.amazon.com/review/RNU4SNVE07QAZ/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

The uses of history have always concerned historians. The uses of history justify the existence of the historical profession (Novick 1988) and there is a rich record of attempts to engage and educate publics (Tyrrell 2005). But alongside this outward movement there has remained an anxiety about abuse. Two classic titles that ask these questions are Moses Finley (1975) and Marc Ferro (2003 [1984]). The concern of the former was with the circulation of arguments posing as historical scholarship and claiming its mantle of legitimacy for political expediency. The abuse was bad scholarship justifying conservative politics. For the latter, abuse was the way distortions of the past taught to children and the public imprinted in their minds wrong conceptions of race and religion distinction.

In the contemporary context, the shadow of abuse is expressed in a concern for how history shapes identity. In academic departments of gender, black and latino studies this concern is foundational. But more relevant for my concerns, it is also prevalent in social, political and intellectual history, referencing or addressing economic ideas and the works of economists. We can see it expressed in the historiography about nationhood. The work Eric Hobsbawm and Trevor Rangel (1992) is obligatory reading on this topic, alongside Benedict Anderson's (1991) classic on the imagined communities of nation states. History, invented, imagined, manipulated becomes a political tool to create cultural boundaries in contemporary societies.²⁷

Some themes repeat in the readings that I have selected for analysis. Economists appears as generative of culture. Economists are never discoverers or memorists, but always inventors, men of intellectual action: Keynes, Hayek, Mises, Nash, Friedman, Von Neumann. Economists always disrupt and reshape: the world economy, the national health service, Chile. Economics comes coupled in some of these narratives with cognition and psychology: Mises and his epistemic outlook; Von Neumann and evolution and cyborgs; Nash and performance managed sociality, and Friedman and shock therapy. Under these interpretations, economists find a way into the most intimate of everyday life, into the shaping of the individual. Hence, readers project an anxiety over the legitimacy of expert discourse in shaping individuals' sense of themselves.

Briefly expressed my point is this: anxieties about economists' role in shaping contemporary society mirror anxieties about the role of history in society. Contemporary of economists' political prominence is determined by the interpretative strategies of history and preconceptions about its political work.

²⁷It is important to note here that we speak of 'invented traditions' or 'mythologies' and not of 'memories' (Bell 2003).

Can we read and write without evil?

I have looked at historical writing as performed by its readers. Its readers are writers in their own right, as they review, interpret and add meaning of the original historical text. I have wanted to argue that in this act of interpretation, in these diverse interpretative contexts, an interesting projection occurs. The anxieties of historical writing, the danger of its abuse as formative of identity, gets expressed in reading narratives about economists. Can we disturb these readings (which are always also writings)? Can we see something other than this projection?

I tentatively suggest two routes to explore this possibility: to consider history as poetics, and to consider history as theater. Jacques Rancière in a famous essay and 1988 seminar played on the possibilities of considering history as story (a distinction that does not exist in French: *histoire*) (Rancière 1994). To release the reading of history from a concern with “consciousness” we can embrace the frame of reading history as stories. The suggestion of writing and reading them as stories, leads one to consider new themes, and particularly engage with the creation and study of characters (their personal turmoils and contradictions, not just their heroism and sense of self-importance). Economists need no longer be “monuments” to our projected consciousness. They no longer need to be heroes or villains. Under the guidance of poetics, it is the invention of new characters and the coloring of their feelings and actions that is prized.

Secondly, we could consider that reading and writing about original historical texts, is a performance. An interpretation is what an actor rehearses and executes. The act of reading and interpreting need not be locked by the belief in closed genres and the deep meaning of texts calling to be prospected. Each review could be a restaging of the original text, playing out its possibilities, rearranging its parts to increase our ability to understand it.

My humble proposal to immunize ourselves from the anxieties of post-modernity is to become either actors or poets.

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