



Book Review

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Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness

James Arnt Aune. New York & London: The Guilford Press, 2001. 220 pp.

The Rhetoric of Economics

Deirdre N. McCloskey. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998 (second edition) 225 pp.

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Economics and poetry may seem, to some, as incompatible as oil and water. This divorce, however, is a recent one, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century: the classic economists such as Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes were both great economists and poets. Today, there are often inbuilt tensions between practitioners of the two disciplines: on the one side, scholarly lovers of words may scarcely be capable of hiding their “maths phobia”, while the economists reserve their weapon of dismissing as irrelevant any critics from the other side, by simply claiming they just don’t understand the science, or they are guilty of “maths inadequacy”. But to ignore the interface between Economics and poetry would be to miss an awful lot, both from the point of view of rhetorical and Economics studies, as well as from the perspective of a broader wish to understand critical social, cultural and political world developments of the twentieth century. Just as we seemed to be burying the discipline of rhetorical studies during the last century, a field that had dominated the academic and intellectual world since its classic ancient foundations from Plato and Aristotle, it has risen again from the ashes to re-emerge as a critical analytical tool to help us make some sense of the world at the turn of the twenty first century.

Economists, like all other human beings, including scientists, use language to persuade. Economic science is *not* a pure science. The rhetorical analysis, therefore, of Economics, is as legitimate and necessary as any other branch of rhetorical analysis. Both books seek to analyse the dominant model of Economics during the 1980s and 1990s. This is the basic and common point of departure uniting the two works: from here, however, one can go many places, as do the two authors of these classic works under review here. McCloskey's fundamental concern in her classic work was to convince fellow economists that, if they were to actually become more conscious that they deploy hundreds of literary and rhetorical devices on a daily basis, they might be able to improve their use of these devices, and channel this towards perfecting their science. Usually, however, as McCloskey fumbles: "*Economists are poets/But don't know it. Economists are storytellers without a clue*". In contrast, Arnt Aune demonstrates how policies such as privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation, transnationalisation and globalisation, which have come to dominate most public policy since the 1970s, and have been known under the broad label "Free Market" policies, were wholeheartedly and uncritically "sold" to the public via the rhetoric of "Economic correctness". Arnt Aune's main aim, then, is to empower the public to better participate in public policy and Economic debate by unpicking the assumptions and rhetorical devices used. In contrast, McCloskey is addressing the global academic scientific community. Though the two books have quite different aims, politics and audiences in mind, they complement each other wonderfully, not least, because Arnt Aune places his analysis firmly in the trajectory of McCloskey, in order to even more firmly reject it.

McCloskey's seminal work, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, first published in 1985, was a landmark in rhetorical studies and the epistemology of Economics. Its publication sparked controversy and debate, in review after review, and her replies to the critics formed the basis for new books (such as *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, published in 1994). The second edition of *Rhetoric* has been reorganised in the light of these debates, not least, because McCloskey was convinced that the original structure of the book had led to its misinterpretation. Many of her readers, she regretted, had erroneously interpreted the book as a philosophical tract and missed the point.

The new edition, thus, opens with two chapters on how and why we should do rhetorical analyses of Economics texts. Economic texts, like novels, construct sources of authority, resort to narratives, and forge a dialogue with an audience. Heightened awareness of literary structures and techniques may improve the field of applied Economics. It does *not* follow, and this she stresses continuously, that Economics is not a science! It is that science uses art for "urgent practical purposes" (p. 21). Case studies follow in the next four chapters, analysing the rhetoric of Samuelson, Coase and Solow among others. Further chapters deal with statistical significance and mathematics in Economics. The wonderful thing about reading McCloskey is that she loves words, and writes as we might imagine her

speaking, her voice lifting up from out of the text into graduate classes full of titillated student onlookers. However, McCloskey laments the way in which her work has had limited impact upon economists. She partially attributes this to their stubbornness, and paints the reason in terms of gender and maturity: the post sex-change McCloskey depicts them as being like a gang of boys playing in a sandbox, still unaware of how they communicate. They determinedly dismiss her contribution, moans McCloskey, because they think she is writing about style, not substance, regardless of the fact, she labours, style *is* substance. Her plea for a more “serious scientific rhetoric” (p. 189) is thus ignored.

McCloskey’s approach is virulently rejected by Arnt Aune, although he pays homage to her contribution to the field, not least by including a ten page appendix on the significance of her pathbreaking development of the rhetorical analysis of Economics. Arnt Aune’s critique is fuelled by the ongoing debates. He attacks McCloskey’s work for being motivated to inoculate neoclassical Economics from criticism, while at the same time, pretending to be an objective analysis of Economic rhetoric. Referring to Mirowski’s criticism, for example, he argues that the selection by economists of specific metaphors appropriated from the worlds of mathematics and physics (such as those about energy) are used in order to lend Economics more legitimacy as a ‘real’ science. Economics is thus portrayed as constituting as much as a science as Physics, Economic forces are like physical forces and, as a consequence, capitalism may be presented as being a timeless and inevitable system. It is not that the critiques of McCloskey think neoclassical Economics is irrelevant, they recognise its importance, but they refuse to accept it should be allowed to take over the whole social and political world landscape, displacing all alternative accounts of human action. McCloskey’s account is atemporal, even Whiggish, he complains. Nor, he points out, is Economic individualism neutral: it would be better labelled male individualism. At the heart of Arnt Aune’s attack on McCloskey is a critique of her self-circumscription in the ivory tower world of academic communication, seemingly far away from an institutional context of politics, policy and society. Without these references, the rhetoric of Economics is impotent and has reached an intellectual dead end, Arnt Aune claims.

Arnt Aune positions himself as an “old-fashioned Socialist” concerned with the way in which a “globalized laissez-faire capitalism” (p. XIV) has (as the rhetoric so often goes) swept the world, while its extreme consequences are yet to be played out. His book seeks to answer the question: How has this “Free Market” of “Economic Correctness” been sold? Questions of funding of academic research in terms of its content, approach and diffusion are foregrounded in Part I. It is not only important to examine what has been said, but who has paid for this to be said (“Who paid for the room?”). He charts the influences of lobbies and think tanks upon publications by “paid intellectuals” and the contents of university courses. At the same time, he describes attacks on university tenure including attempts by politicians to intimidate him from

publishing his ideas and findings. On occasions, funding “taints” academic work: neutrality is impossible due to the demands the sponsor puts on the author. Arnt Aune examines the strategy in selected funded texts and highlights how the author “shuts off” other possible solutions to a Political-Economic problem and puts forward only the desired one by the sponsor: “the putatively scientific analysis rests on specific strategic choices to suppress certain arguments (through sheer inattention) and bring selected others into clearer focus...” (p. 33). Some of the rhetorical devices of libertarian economists are exposed clearly. One of these is the “perversity thesis”: “if you try to do x, the result will be y, that is the opposite direction”. Every move may generate a perverse (but never beneficial) countermove, so it is best not even to attempt this progressive policy (p. 28). Adoption of a “realist”, no-nonsense approach, which paints poets as dreamers, is another technique in order to forge a consensus about the inevitability of the Free Market.

Selected influential texts responsible for the “spread” of neoconservative thought are then analysed, including Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, the best-selling science fiction novel first published in 1957, which defends the Free Market through a romance narrative, and (for Arnt Aune, the almost equally fictitious) classic work on political philosophy, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, by Nozick, first published in 1974. Here, Arnt Aune shows how Nozick uses a “potential explanation” technique borrowed from the natural sciences to construct authority and legitimacy in his attempt to justify a minimal state. Since Nozick is dealing with potential history, not history, he argues, historical critics for one are closed off should they wish to argue with him (p. 83). The slippery slope argument is ruthlessly deployed: “if you do x, y is bound to happen, inevitably” (p. 86). This is used to reject the application of redistributive policies. Any possible positive externality produced such as universal education, which makes communal living more pleasant and safe, is ignored. This is a real insight and, Arnt Aune goes further, if “*the right has come to power largely by creating and exploiting a sense of victimhood on the part of the 'ordinary, hard-working taxpayer'*” (p. 91) Nozick helped provide the philosophical ammunition for that argument.

Finally, in Part III, Arnt Aune examines the political discourse of neoconservative politicians, including Ronald Reagan, as well as the rhetoric of intellectuals including the Tofflers, George Gilder, Newt Gingrich, cyberpunk novelists William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and avant-garde communication scholar Roseanne Allucquère Stone. Reagan, the “Great Communicator” fused apocalyptic religious imagery with the secular, to soften his hard-core right wing agenda, broaden its appeal, while building a romantic narrative where history is a struggle for progress against great obstacles and malicious villains. He tracks the rhetoric of inevitability connected to the globalisation narrative, with the three stage theory of history (Tofflers) and Gilder’s *Life after Television* where, it is argued, new information and communication technologies will allow us to

become the media “gatekeepers” and thus return to traditional family values, safe from the onslaught of commercial television.

These two books, as a pair, provide an accessible entry point to scholars in business and corporate communications who wish to analyse economics and economic and political rhetoric. Their reading may even provide an inspiring starting point for a research project or the development of pedagogical materials. At the same time, the books are invaluable for economics scholars at an intermediate to high level. Political scientists and sociologists alike will also find these books useful in their detailed approach.

Combined, these two books make an immense contribution to understanding the epistemology and dominance of neoconservative Economics at the end of the twentieth century. The strength and primary interest of Arnt Aune’s book lies in its political interest: we could use it to examine the communication of the incumbent US President, George W. Bush. The main disappointment of Arnt Aune’s book, however, is its tendency towards parochialism and inward-lookingness. This is a shame, since, if we accept that the “Free Market” (both its political discourses and practices) were diffused globally, led largely by the United States, it is imperative to examine the theories of Americanisation (as opposed to globalisation). Perhaps even more seriously, the transformation of neoconservative ideas into the agendas of international financial organisations in the aftermath of the debt crisis into conditionality clauses imposed clumsily and indiscriminately upon poor countries (as exposed by Joseph Stiglitz in *Globalisation and its Discontents*) would have made the study much richer and broader in scope. Though Arnt Aune is correct when he criticises McCloskey for turning a blind eye to certain political questions, McCloskey’s contribution is, in the end, a more universal critique of interest to the current and future global scientific community.

