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OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Notre Dame Loses

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Not in football.

This morning I was planning my courses for next academic year, thinking what books I would assign, what balance of topics the students and I would pursue, and it struck me: "I *love* doing this. In fact, I love almost *everything* about my job as a professor." But the paradox is, if I love the job so much why are there days on which I can *taste* my pension, years down the pike?

I'll tell you why. University presidents, provosts, vice-presidents, deans, and chairs, that oxymoron parallel to "military intelligence," "academic administration." That's why. It must be a difficult job, because it's seldom done even competently, this administering. Someone on the internet dreamed up an amusing but distressingly accurate spoof on a "new element" just discovered, Administratium: "The element . . . has no protons or electrons and thus has an atomic number of 0. However, it does have 1 neutron, 125 assistant neutrons, 75 vice neutrons, and 111 assistant vice neutrons, giving it an atomic mass of 312. These 312 particles are held together in the nucleus by a force that involves the continuous exchange of meson-like particles called morons."

I've done a little administration, and was no good at it, which shows the problem: professors are not trained as administrators, and do not get into the professing business because they have gifts for leadership. Therefore they often don't approach administration in a businesslike way. Former professors of German or chemical engineering or church history, not to speak of professors of "applied" game theory, do not understand that business actually depends on Love and Justice as much as on Prudence and Courage. The point has been made throughout his career by the inventor of the modern academic study of business, Peter Drucker. In a famous article in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1989, for example, he noted that businesses are coming to resemble voluntary organizations like churches: in a free society people will exit if they aren't loved. The academic bosses by contrast take their view of American business from anti-bourgeois artists and intellectuals since 1848: Marx, Shaw, Diego Rivera, Sinclair Lewis, Kurt Weil, Oliver Stone. Therefore in playing at being businesslike they reckon they have to be brutal and thoughtless and dogmatic and impulsive. So they don't succeed.

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Let's see: some common-sense and Druckerian rules for success might be: Mainly encourage. Threaten sparingly. Support all your people. Use actual reading and reflecting, your own, to decide who has the most exciting ideas. Don't depend on mindless rankings devised by quantophiles who don't know econometrics and don't believe in judgment, such as the economist David Laband [McCloskey 2001, 140-48; Beed and Beed, 1996]. Depend on your faculty to read seriously their colleagues' works for hiring and promotion, and for having an intellectual life together, discussing the work and reporting to you on their deliberations. Make them do it. . . well, encourage them to, and if they come to you with tables of rankings as substitutes for engaging intellectually with their colleagues' work, cut their budgets, to get the dough to encourage departments that take intellectual life seriously. Decide what your business is, noting that it is *not* "ranking high in surveys of badly-informed strangers who have not thought for ten consecutive seconds about your college." This above all: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

What the administration is doing right now to the Department of Economics at the University of Notre Dame has become a case study in violating such common sense. You may have read about it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* last January [Monaghan, 2003]. Administratium there has leaked out of its sealed containers and is poisoning the environment. Time for the cleanup guys in space suits.

Academically speaking Notre Dame was once not much of a place. When the sainted Father Hesburgh first arrived fifty years ago he called a press conference to announce his plans to raise standards, and was chagrined when only *sports writers* showed up. But it's gotten a lot better. Notre Dame's philosophy department, for example, is very interesting, studying "Continental" philosophy seriously, which is to say that it's not devoted exclusively (as are most American departments) to the deadening orthodoxy of what's known as "analytic" philosophy (cf. Samuelsonian economics). And when a brilliant colleague of mine at Iowa named Gerald Bruns went to Notre Dame's English department, I took note. Around 1980 Notre Dame showed the good taste to ask me if I wanted to be the chair of economics there, and I was tempted (but since I am, like most professors, a dope at administration I'm glad for Notre Dame's sake that I didn't take up the post). Though not at the time a Christian, much less a Catholic, I thought the idea of a heterodox place that took religious and similar thought seriously in its relation to economics would be a good idea. Even then I had begun to see we had an excess supply of low-grade imitations of MIT, and that American economics was going down a bad road in trying by thuggery in refereeing and hiring and other honor-granting to make every department identical to every other.

The Department of Economics at Notre Dame has a faculty of 23. It's known as a "heterodox" department—post-Keynesian, Marxist, institutionalist, rhetorical, though it has some thoughtful Samuelsonians as well. Everyone gets along fine. I know the work of two of the faculty pretty well, David Ruccio and Philip Mirowski, and of one slightly, Esther-Miriam Sent. By "know" I mean "have read with some seriousness," not "have heard about as objects of gossip" or "have seen as names in *The Leading Journals*" or "have classified as Us or Them by an ignoramus' version of the philosophy of science" or "have taken the measure of through Laband's statistically amateurish work on reputation." If you haven't read anything by Ruccio, Mirowski, and

Sent, well, you need to broaden your reading in economics. You're spending too much time with *The American Economic Review*.

Ruccio is a leading Marxist economist. (If your reaction to that is to exclaim, "leading Marxist economist!" then you really need to get out more. Does it strike you as a reasonable hypothesis that every one of the thousands and thousands of intelligent people who take the Marxist tradition seriously is a dope from whom you can learn nothing at all?) Ruccio is an expert in Latin American economies and a leader in bringing the humanities and economics into conversation (if you've been reading my columns you know why I think such a conversation is a good idea). The words "value" and "deconstruction" and even "postmodernism" have figured heavily in Ruccio's work over the past decade. Such terms are I know pretty scary. May I suggest gently—I've experienced the difficulty economists have in hearing the suggestion—that *The New York Times* is perhaps not the last word on literary theory, and that failed-English-Ph.D. journalists might not really grasp the words they hate so passionately? Ruccio does grasp the words of the humanities. A quinti-lingual economist is rare enough (sextilingual if you count math/stat as a language; which I'd better). But an economist who uses the languages to read seriously in comparative literature and the humanities, *and then applies his learning to economics*, is practically unheard of. See for instance the new book by David Ruccio, Jack Amariglio, and Robert Sattelmeyer *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics*, this fall from the Princeton University Press. Even the great Albert Hirschman, long at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and my favorite example these days of a missed yet blindingly obvious candidate for a Nobel Prize (until last November it was Vernon Smith; before that it was George Akerloff: non-mainstream, both), even the great Hirschman, I say, has been timid by the Ruccio standard in bringing the humanities to bear on economic issues.

Philip Mirowski is also something special in economics. He started as an economic historian, a highly original one, but then became a student of economics itself, especially its history, and emerged as even more original. His original idea is the shocking one of *actually looking at how economists argue*. Craazy. Again, you can see why I like what he does: just as I think it's a mistake that economics has not faced up to the issues Marxists and English professors draw attention to (heh, and vice versa, I say to my colleagues in English), I also think it's a mistake that economics has not faced up to its actual persuasive character and history. Mirowski exposed one of the con games in modern economics in his famous book *More Heat Than Light: Economics as Social Physics* [1989] and *Against Mechanism: Why Economics Needs Protection from Science* [1988], and then took off in an entirely new direction in *Machine Dreams: Economics becomes a Cyborg Science* [2001]. Mirowski is one of the most original minds examining the character of economics that has ever graced the discipline (Sent works with him on the same project, and so far as I can judge is pretty good in her own right).

A correct use of statistical significance is the following: if out of the 23 people in the Department a majority of 12 (say) were by a high standard Not Competent, Bad Economists Because Weird, Non-Mainstream, and Therefore to be Punished, what are the odds that out of the three balls I have drawn from the urn all three turn out to be outstanding economic scientists? Answer: about ten to one against.

What's the problem nowadays at Notre Dame? One way of putting it is that the administrators on the basis of childish incompetent "rankings" don't believe these are the odds. The Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, one Mark Roche, together with his agent in Economics, Richard Jensen, with the backing of the Provost, Nathan Hatch, and the apparent entrepreneurship of the Dean of the Graduate School, Jeffrey Kantor, has decided therefore that Notre Dame's Econ Dept is broke . . . and should become mainstream. The department for example is to abandon courses on Political Economy and the History of Economic Thought (which set economics in its wider social context) as requirements in the graduate program. It is to make its graduate program look like nearly every other program in the United States, for example, make the theory courses duller and more "mathematical" and more useless for actual scientific work; hire more econometricians, to teach the kids even more completely how to misuse statistical significance (when is the profession going to catch on to the diminishing returns to more and more and more and more econometrics?). Or else.

The Department has resisted, politely. It's being punished with appointments imposed on it; and its promotions have been turned back. The administration of course has paid no attention to the department's views, that being one of the rules of Anti-Druckerite Administratum Production. The department may be abolished entirely, its distinctive graduate program scrapped, and a new one started that will be drearily Samuelsonian. I infer from the rhetoric when this threat is raised that the Graduate Dean, Kantor, who is a chemical engineer, is behind it. He's been fooled, it seems, as so many physical scientists have, by the absurd claim that modern Samuelsonian economics is mathematical and quantitative "like physics" (as the Samuelsonians put it; for the history of this bizarre claim see Mirowski's work). That the math is in fact existence theorems from the *mathematics* department, not magnitude-math from physics and engineering, and that the allegedly "quantitative" work is vitiated by its entire dependence on meaningless tests of statistical significance (which no physicist or engineer relies on) hasn't seeped into the consciousness of outsiders. (Don't tell them: we may get away with this phony way of claiming scientific status for another decade or so. Heck, we may *never* have to explore the actual magnitudes of economic phenomena! We could go on being Samuelsonian solvers of chess problems *forever*, and get high rankings in the [Samuelsonian] journal counts without having to learn *anything* about any extant economy!)

Deans Kantor, Roche, and company argue that the faculty don't publish in enough Top Journals. That they *do* publish important books doesn't seem to cut any ice. Publish in the so-called refereed journals or die. That the Department *is* famous for its unusual character is not to be tolerated. Either you produce Dull-Normal Though Bankrupt "Science" or you better watch out. As a professor at another university said recently when he heard the news, "Well, I guess there's more heat than light at Notre Dame."

The attack on good economics at Notre Dame is a case of shooting oneself in the foot. True, a lot of university administrators do it. They are besotted with the alleged accuracy and objectivity of rankings of journals and (therefore) of departments. The ranked-and-refereed-article standard is obviously crazy for senior people: how many times do you have to crowd out junior people in your sub-field desperate for a big hit

of their own to show that you can do *that* trick? (Listen up, Jeff Williamson.) But it's pretty unhelpful for evaluating the junior people, too. Why? This: the standard should be Notre Dame's, not that of the editorial board of the *American Economic Review* (I have served on it, and I know).

Read the stuff. Isn't that obviously the only way of raising standards—having some? Who cares that an economist has demonstrated that he knows how to misuse statistical significance and existence-theorem proofs so he can get through the idiot's screen of major-journal refereeing? ("Show me your *existence theorem* for this economic idea," the Idiot Boy bumbles. Then adds cleverly, "And what's the *statistical significance* of that coefficient?") Under such circumstances, where the paper is published is irrelevant to the question whether Professor X is doing good scientific work. Simply irrelevant. For Lord's sake, read it.

Let's think this through. Dean Roche, leading the charge against his abnormal Department of Economics, is a professor of German literature and of film. He is also an adjunct in the Department of Philosophy. Now, let's see. What would have happened to Dean Roche's academic career if the normal in American academic life had been enforced by his present methods? What if Dean Roche had had a Dean Roche? I think that's a fair test. If mindless belief in conventional wisdom and mindless use of rankings would have ruined American academic life in the past, maybe, just maybe, it will ruin it in the future, too.

In 1960 (say) it was unheard of that an academic student of literature (except outsiders like crazy French intellectuals smoking up cafés, and a Frankfurt Marxist or two) would discuss *movies*. Really, now, discussing movies is so *vulgar*. But discussing movies is among the things Dean Roche actually does. Under the Dean Roche Plan therefore we should increase Professor Roche's teaching load, to give him the right incentives (note that teaching here is punishment: "Vee have vays") to publish only mainstream, conventional criticism of Thomas Mann's novels (actually, Roche sometimes does write such criticism, in the way that Ruccio sometimes writes mainstream work on Latin American economies and Mirowski on economic history).

The sort of *philosophy* that Dean Roche studies is forbidden in most American departments of philosophy. It's that same "Continental" philosophy in which Notre Dame is so prominent, Hegel and such stuff. Continental philosophy in American departments has a standing similar to that of Political Economy (interpreted in a Marxist mode) in American departments of economics. Most American (or indeed most English-speaking—and, oddly, Finnish-speaking) philosophers don't regard anything but the demonstrated sterilities of analytic philosophy 1955-style as Real Philosophy. (Does that ring a bell, oh economist?) When I asked a famous analytic philosopher of my acquaintance named Searle whether he had read any Hegel he replied, to the amusement of the grad students in philosophy listening to our exchange, "No. I've never read a page of Hegel, Deirdre, and I propose never to do so." (Hey, John, does it strike you as a reasonable hypothesis that every one of the thousands and thousands of intelligent people who take the Hegelian tradition seriously [among them Marxist economists, such as David Ruccio] is just a dope from whom you can learn nothing at all?)

So I think in addition we ought to cut Dean/Professor Roche's salary, don't you? Probably we should close down the Department of German at Notre Dame, too, and remake it into a Department of German Literary Subjects Normally Covered in 1960: Middle High German phonology and belletristic or old historical criticism of Goethe, Heine, maybe Mann, *exclusively*, that sort of thing, right? And let's kill while we're at it that novelty (in 1960) called comparative literature, in which Roche shows disturbing signs of interest. Roche sometimes doesn't do normal, mainstream, conventional work in a conventional, dull-normal Department of German c. 1960. That's just *terrible*.

I invite the Graduate Dean, Kantor, if this talk of literary matters gives him a headache, to imagine what would have happened to chemical engineering if in 1900 no chemist had been allowed to speak to an engineer, and form a new sort of engineering. It's a correct cliché of academic history, which one would expect a Dean of a Graduate School to know, that since WW II in the physical and especially the biological science the interdisciplinary work of the sort Ruccio, Mirowski, and Sent do from Economics is where most of the advances have been made. Perhaps Dean Kantor has forgotten that Crick of the structure of DNA was a *physicist* and Watson a *zoologist*; and that Rosalind Franklin became famous in chemistry from her work on *coal*, not on life. These people, he would say now, needed to stay in their fields and publish in the regular, usual journals, right? No abnormal thinking, please. Not at Notre Dame. And no scientific advance.

Of course I've not actually *read* any of Dean Roche's work in German literature and film and Continental philosophy, or for that matter Dean Kantor's in chemical engineering or Chairman Jensen's work in the so-called "applications" of game theory (stay tuned, for a column about this unscientific nuttiness, and meanwhile have a look at Fisher 1989; by the way, Jensen writes papers on "applied" game theory with the chair at Emory, Jeff Thursby; one guess as to what's happening to the once-adventuresome department at Emory nowadays). I'm too busy meeting with chairs, deans, and provosts to engage seriously with scholarship at Notre Dame.

But like Roche, Kantor, and Jensen I know without reading what constitutes academic excellence: Normal work. The average. The mainstream. Preferably what was done in German Departments in 1960 at Columbia (and chemical engineering in 1900 at Cornell; and in economics in 1955 at M.I.T.). No novelties, please: we're Scientists. And I have a really neat measure in which I ask normal, average people who have not read a serious book outside their fields for thirty years to tell me what kind of work they like best. It's quite unnecessary to read and consider. Calculate the outcomes of a corrupted scientific hierarchy; measure out-of-date scholarship, incompetently. That's the ticket.

The Provost at Notre Dame, Nathan Hatch, is a distinguished historian of American religion. Anything strange there? Well, his main book is about the democratization of American religion. Power to the parishioners (Boston Catholics, take note). But not power to the professors, I guess. The Dean of the Graduate School, that Kantor, is as I said a chemical engineer. None of these people, except the economist Chair, Richard Jensen, knows anything about social statistics, which is what the mindless rankings they depend on are. Probably Jensen doesn't actually know anything about survey research itself, since few economists do.

I wonder if any of the Notre Dame administrators intent on exterminating abnormality in the Department of Economics knows of the survey of journal rankings in economics done by Hawkins, Ritter, and Walter [1973] that inserted two *fictitious* journals with hard-to-mistake names into the list of 100 or so. It will surprise no one who believes that you actually have to *read and understand* science and scholarship to evaluate it (and, to get technical, that surveys have to be tested for reliability) that large numbers of those surveyed claimed to be “familiar” with *Journal of Economic and Statistical Theory* and *Regional Studies and Economic Change* and ranked the theory journal high, and well above the applied one. Garbage in, academic ruin out.

Academic economics in the United States has a scientific range all the way from M to N. This is not because the Samuelsonian mainstream is such a smashing scientific success, unless you count numbers of Samuelsonian articles certified by Samuelsonian professors in Samuelsonian journals as “success.” Real insight into the economy does not come from existence theorems buttressed by statistical significance, that is, the cargo-cult method of the Samuelsonians (if you can *stand* another attempt by me to get these points across see *The Secret Sins of Economics*). Insight comes from the dwindling number of individual economists and sometimes whole departments of economics (fortunately the political scientists, sociologists, and policy mavens are taking up the slack) who think, as the present Department of Economics at Notre Dame does (wait a while), that economics is the study of the economy and is a part of the conversation of humankind.

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