

## Reply to Professor Klein\*

100.

Something in what I have written has angered Professor Klein. It is not clear what. His piece begins strangely by talking at considerable length about William Baumol, and then turns to a series of disconnected remarks about my work. But the remarks arise from bizarre misreadings, astonishing from so eminent a historian. On other occasions and by other readers my arguments have sometimes been misunderstood, even reserved, as here: But they have not yet been so thoroughly deconstructed. I must be missing some jest, some parody of French intellectuality, a picture of a pipe with a caption saying 'This is not a pipe.'

I would certainly never say, to take one of several dozen astonishing misreadings that might be mentioned, that 'the main mistake of economics [is] taking for granted that self-interest and competition govern the economic world.' And I would of course never assert that self-interest came into the world, or even into the mind of the world, with Adam Smith. Yet Professor Klein complains that I have said such things. I am afraid that Professor Klein has wholly misread my paper and other pieces of my work he has cast his eyes over.

People sometimes react in this blinded, spluttering way to the radical things I am saying, such as that economics uses argument, that economists are human beings, that the past is useful for economics, or that no economist can expect to grow rich merely by looking up the formulas of his science. I realize that such assertions are shocking, and inconsistent with the received rules for science, so solidly based on an amateur and ahistorical understanding of nineteenth-century physics. I do not know why I have a compulsion to say such outrageous things. It is shameful. I apologize.

A good part of Professor Klein's problem with reading my work is that he does not know when I am joking (as for instance I just was). Irony is not his strong suit. For example, my jest about a government shooting all people with eyeglasses (not so funny, consider that it was in fact the policy of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia) was clearly meant to give an extreme example of an utterly uncontroversial 'prediction' in economics, to give a mere polar case. Professor Klein takes it unsmilingly, and demands with some indignation the names of the economists who make the eyeglass prediction.

He misses the joke, and the point, again, of the analogy of economics with weather forecasting, which was that at short range and for matters in which profitmaking is not at issue the two forecastings are quite similar. He demands hotly that I provide statistical demonstrations that they are *not* similar. Huh? His commentary

\* See P.W. Klein, 'Some comments on The storied character of economics', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 101 (1988) 655-659

is jammed with *non sequiturs* of this sort.

The extent to which Professor Klein cannot grasp my little ironies is astonishing. Surely it is my poor English. I do not believe we would disagree in Dutch. Professor Klein supposes, for instance, that I advocate the closing of trade between history and economics because in another article (and also in the present one, though sharply) I concluded that the two fields already really do many similar things, to their conviction that they do different things, and therefore have no barrier to trade. The article to which he refers was aimed squarely at economists, who presumably got the joke (it has to do with the technical conditions for mutually advantageous trade). But Professor Klein did not notice who the audience was, and therefore missed the irony. My point was of course exactly the opposite (it goes away with irony), namely, that trade between history and economics is vitally important for both. Klein betrays some familiarity with my other work, and one might think he could have inferred from it that I have been engaged for twenty years precisely such an intellectual trade.

When in the last two paragraphs, after many preliminaries, he gets down to Professor Klein again loses his way. I discern through the fog a point that he has made, they do not see how I can describe economics as rhetorical and yet maintain that Chicago-School, neoclassical economics is useful, as I do. The point which appears to be the only actual argument in Klein's piece, is not a very strong one. There is no logical inconsistency between advocacy of market solutions and advocacy of a conversational model of scholarship. The pathbreaking work of the Dutch economist, Arjo Klamer, advocates the one without the other. I advocate both. They are no more connected than are a belief in transubstantiation and a belief in Fermat's last theorem.

Professor Klein's parting remark is that he does not see why economics and history should be considered together. Quite. I realize he does not see why. Seemingly was the subject of the paper. I suggest that Professor Klein give the paper an even calmer reading. I feel sure we in fact agree, beyond the confusions created by his ironies and his indignation.

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