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from James H. Nichols, Jr. and Colin Wright, eds.
Political Economy to Economics--And Back? (San
Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press,
1990).

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Eight

The Rhetoric of Political Economy

The phrase "political economy" is contested because it is worth owning. The winner gains the prestige of an earlier economics, antedating the metaphor of mathematics, and gains too the prestige of realism—for who would deny the politics in the economy and the economics in the polity?

Political economy can of course be attached to the politics in economic policy, those "political constraints" so irritating to economists. "Why can't we have a rational farm policy?" Well, take note of the senators from Vermont and Iowa. It is no accident that economics became detached from the label "political economy" in the middle of the last century, at the nadir of interference in the economy. Defining "political economy" as the politics in economic policy makes it a branch of political science. It is the low-status economics of practical policy, scorned by deep thinkers, who nonetheless watch it closely. The slow-motion wrestling between the octopus of corporate capitalism and the giant squid of government makes good viewing.

Such a political economy is plainly rhetorical, in the agora, in the World Bank, in Senate hearings. It fits with the definition of "rhetoric" in the newspapers, as the speaking that politicians use when they have nothing much to say. "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." But political speaking has more to it than "rhetoric" in the popular and ornamental sense. If politicians gave only inaugural

addresses, not much could be learned about politics from their words. But they talk much more than that.

Ornaments are not without meaning, of course, and even inaugural addresses repeat the sustaining myths of democracy. But speech also moves people to action by "deliberative" rhetoric (as opposed to "epideictic" rhetoric, to use the old categories). Contrary to the assertions of a vulgar Marxism that reduces words always to material interests (as does for instance George Stigler, America's leading vulgar Marxist), argument counts. The political scientist G. R. Boynton has recently given the example of agricultural hearings in the Senate. He examined every exchange over twenty years, and found that stories of "our experience" dominated the proceedings, restricting the range of policies that were considered seriously. The senators practically never asked the opinion of economists. "We tried that in 1955," a senator would say, and the advocate would fall silent.¹

Two other definitions of political economy are parallel to each other. They either reduce politics to economics (thus Stigler, Anthony Downs, and Mancur Olson) or reduce economics to politics (thus J. K. Galbraith, Albert Hirschman, and Brian Barry). The rhetoric comes from the professors' mouths. The reductive moves are metaphors. The professors say, "Power, you see, is money." Or they say, "Money, after all, is power." Political parties are "just like" business firms and cartels, or business firms and cartels are "just like" political parties. Such metaphors, as the philosopher Max Black put it, have "the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other."² Note the political metaphor of power and domain.

The study of rhetoric, then, allows one to watch what is at stake in an argument about politics, whether among senators or among professors. The division of the economic from the political sphere is itself a rhetorical move, as when economic experts take certain politics as their own or when political economy brings vote trading in Congress under an economic and therefore a Scientific model. The arguments can be serious and scientific, or mere puffery and guile; but they will always be rhetorical. Rhetoric is not confined to phony persuasion or to "soft" evidence. Taking note of the available means of persuasion is not necessarily a condemnation of the means. It may be just fine that senators use stories, and economists use metaphors, to argue about politics. In fact, it is hard to imagine what else they would do.

The study of what they all do is called the "rhetoric of inquiry"—much exercised recently in economics, history, political theory, and

other subjects.³ The name says merely that inquiry is rhetorical. It notes that an academic subject, such as the study of political constitutions or of partial differential equations, will consist of argument. The argument will of course be a matter of proofs and facts, but what counts as a proof or a fact will vary from time to time and from field to field. In the exordium of his book *Political Argument*, Brian Barry quotes the economist Jacob Viner: "There is a third kind of rhetoric . . . whose task is . . . to discover for particular values their appropriate place in the process of persuasion. To me this last kind of rhetoric seems a most appropriate one for the academic scholar."⁴ That's about right.

The neglected arguments surface in the details of politics and economies. Rhetoric, like God, is in the details. Noticing how scholarship itself consists of such devices is the rhetoric of inquiry. Paying attention to rhetoric of inquiry is a way of becoming self-conscious about scholarly arguments. You may, if you wish, sneer at self-consciousness as something only Californians would desire, but you are likely to end up sneering out of the other side of your mouth. Awareness of rhetoric redeems an economist from enslavement to some defunct philosopher.

Philosophies of inquiry, as distinct from rhetorics, are influential in the social sciences, mainly because they are narrowing and therefore simplifying. Mainly they say, "You can't do that,"—in other words, "You needn't bother with that." George Stigler and Gary Becker, for instance, tell economists to stick to budget constraints and other "objective" matters, because about tastes one should not dispute.⁵ But a few economists such as Albert Hirschman argue persuasively against such specialization, and a sociologist like Pierre Bourdieu has of course gone further.⁶ Similarly, a long-standing rule in economics, said by its advocates to derive from positivism and other good ways of narrowing the conversation, forbids economists to use questionnaires. (Statistical questionnaires are all right, such as income tax forms and census returns, in which the respondents are of course candid. It's those devilish verbal questionnaires—about investment plans, price expectations, or even presidential preferences—that are epistemologically suspect. Why? Well, people, you know, *have been known to lie.*) The political economist who stops worrying about self-consciousness will end up a zombie to some Method.

Talking about "rhetoric" is a rich way of talking about self-consciousness in argument. It allows one to adopt narrowing philosophical rules if one wishes, but provides a way to watch the

adoption. As a method of observing academic behavior, it tends toward wider arguments and freer societies.

Economics and Law: An Example

Consider a straightforward example, from the political and legal economy of Judge Richard Posner:

Our survey of the major common law fields suggests that the common law exhibits a deep unity that is economic in character. . . . The common law method is to allocate responsibilities between people engaged in interacting activities in such a way as to maximize the joint value . . . of the activities. . . . The judge can hardly fail to consider whether the loss was the product of wasteful, uneconomical resource use. In a culture of scarcity, this is an urgent, an inescapable question.⁷

The argument is attractive, at least to McCloskey, who is fond of its author (among other reasons, for learning ancient Greek as an adult); we did not pick the passage because we think it wrong or think Richard Posner the embodiment of evil. Unhappily there is a rhetoric of rhetoric, at least as it is understood these days, which we wish to oppose. Attention to rhetoric need not be debunking. We picked the Posner passage because it typifies one branch of political economy, the one that looks at the political (and in this case, the legal) world economically. Economics, we are suggesting, is not immune to literary scrutiny. Accordingly, look at the words as scholarly poetry. Go back to freshman English, and read them for their effect.

Posner's argument is carried in part by the equivocal use of the vocabulary of economics. *Allocate*, *maximize*, *value*, and *scarcity* are technical words in economics, with precise definitions; here Posner uses them also in wider senses, evoking scientific power to claim precision without necessarily attaining it. The sweetest turn is the use of *uneconomical*, not in fact a technical word in economics. It encapsulates Posner's argument that judges act as though they followed economic models, because to do otherwise would be "wasteful." The economical/uneconomical figure of speech supports the claim that economic arguments (arguments about scarcity) are pervasive in the law. Triple repetition (technically, *commoratio*) hammers it home: first in the word *uneconomical*; then in the reference to a "culture of scarcity" (a nice echo of "a culture of poverty," from the other side of the tracks); and finally in the repetition, "urgent, inescapable."

People involved with one another in auto accidents or breaches of contract are said to be "engaged in interacting activities." Posner does not, however, acknowledge that they interact also in political and moral systems. A farmer and a railroad "interact" when a spark from the engine burns the wheat, but a judge does not "interact" with citizens who believe that big enterprises like railroads are blameworthy merely because they are big. The Latinate vocabulary of "engaging in interacting activities" makes an appeal to the character of the observer or, better, the scientist. Technically speaking, the argument is an "ethical" one, making use of the *ethos* (the character) of the speaker. The scientific vocabulary partakes of the clinical—but carries with it, unspoken, a philosophy of community. The words matter. The style is the substance.

Again, the passage uses the metaphor of "deepness" in unity to support its metaphors, as do similar attempts to change minds. The University of Chicago legal economist will claim, with Posner, that the deep structure of American law celebrates capitalism. A critical legal theorist, similarly, will claim that the deep structure of law apologizes for capitalism.

And so forth: one can in this way examine the texts of political economy rhetorically. One can ask what genres it uses, what figures it deploys, who are its implied readers, whether there is a text in this class.

Public Choice: Another Example

The approach is applicable to any passage whatever. Consider for instance five sentences from another seminal book in political economy, from which we quote the third complete sentence on each of five pages chosen by random number:

1. "Moreover, a significant factor in the popular support for socialism through the centuries has been the underlying faith that the shift of an activity from the realm of private to that of social choice involves the replacement of the motive of private gain by that of social good."⁸ Read the sentence twice, as students of poetry are advised to do, noting the force of the words. Even a sentence chosen at random produces nuggets of close reasoning. Yet notice that the main clause is routine to the point of cliché and redundancy: "significant factor" (why would one bother if it were not significant?); "through the centuries" (again, why bother otherwise? A historian would be embarrassed to

use such a tinkling phrase); "underlying faith" (come now: isn't all faith "underlying"?). The clause lulls with conventionality, and with a little "rhetoric" in the street sense. We are about to be treated to a Political Opinion. But the counterrhetoric of Science works here, too. If the phrases "through the centuries" and "underlying faith" would fit an inaugural address, "popular support" would not, and "significant factor" most assuredly not. In fact, the dual rhetorics of political passion and scientific observation pervade the book. No one can doubt that the authors are passionately committed to freedom, and freedom by an individualistic definition (despite what the authors say on p. vii). Yet it is undoubtedly true, as the blurb to the paperback edition announces, that the book is also "a scientific study of the political and economic factors influencing democratic decision-making, based largely on the methods of modern economics and game theory" (emphasis supplied).

The second, dependent clause (following "that") is where the sentence and the ideas come to life. The clause has an eighteenth-century air, as though plucked from Smith or Hume. Note the Ciceronian parallels, reinforced by parallel syntax: "the realm of private to that of social" corresponds with "the motive of private . . . by that of social." Common opinion would say that private choice leads to private gain, social choice to public good, and even the alliteration of "gain" and "good" drives the point home. The phrasing is ornamental, but an ornament with substance: here we have, it says, a mistaken symmetry in human thinking, persisting "throughout the ages" (as the next sentence reiterates, while the historian squirms with embarrassment).

2. "All externalities, negative and positive, will be eliminated as a result of purely voluntary arrangements that will be readily negotiated among private people."⁹ We are here taken away from the elegance of the eighteenth-century philosophers. If the word "externalities" has become too familiar to convey the message that this is twentieth-century Science, the reader will catch the message nonetheless in the mathematical talk of "negative and positive." Scientific prose, Newton's invention, favors two passive verbs in one sentence—"will be eliminated . . . will be . . . negotiated." The passive suggests, as the sentence avers, that the result is unstoppable, the result of no named human agency (even as the sentence names the agency as "private people"). The removal of agency is part of the rhetoric of mathematical proof, giving a strange double message to a social science

approaching society scientifically. There is no contradiction here, merely countercurrents of suggestion.

3. "In order to be able to do so, [the modern welfare economist] falls back on the criterion designed by Pareto."¹⁰ The "modern welfare economist" is of course personified, a figure extended over two pages, the better to quarrel with him. If the criterion were not named, and not fallen back on by a namable person, it would be one of those undiscussable parts of the furniture that the passive voice announces. It would have to be, "Another criterion must be fallen back on" ("must," to retain the force of "in order to be able to do so"). But the superiority of the veil of ignorance over the Pareto criterion is the thing to be discussed. So it had better *not* be part of the furniture. The mention of Pareto, by the way, looks in isolation like an appeal to authority, that commonest of academic figures, but in context is not. It is merely a name to conjure with.

4. "If less than a simple majority should be required for carrying a decision, the expected external costs would be greater, but the costs of reaching the necessary agreement among members of the effective coalition would be lower than under the operation of simple majority rules."¹¹ The sentence repeats one of the main analytic results of the book: that with larger majorities required, the rising costs of reaching an agreement to vote for x works against the falling levels of "external costs" (namely, the hurt to the outvoted if something less than unanimity is required). The involved and lawlike formulation would be unintelligible without preparation. It occurs as recapitulation at the beginning of a chapter late in the book; the recapitulation says, this is the ground we have already covered. As the preceding sentence puts it, "the results . . . will be apparent to those who have understood . . . the preceding chapters." It does not invite doubt, and is cast in wholly "positive" terms. No passion fuels it. The vocabulary is academic, as befits the statement of a scientific finding. As usual in economics, however, the finding is a blackboard finding, not "empirical" on a narrow definition. The repetition is made necessary by the nonstatistical character of the finding. If the result had been 3.14159, there would have been no need to keep reminding the reader of the logic that sustains it. The logic, not the numbers, will justify the authors' claim.

The authors do not use positivistic standards of proof, though they bow to them occasionally (on this page: "Given the behavioral assumptions of our models"; but as in most economics, their observable

implications are commonplaces). Note the conditional, "would be," continued in the next and concluding sentence of the paragraph. The conditional is the mood of frankest theorizing (as it sees itself), announcing itself to be conditional on certain assumptions being met. Here it changes to the future of prediction—the apodosis of a general condition, to be exact—sustained throughout the next two paragraphs, after the absolving phrase, "Given the behavioral assumptions." Thus, "individuals will tend," "bargaining will be required," "collective action will result in," and so forth. The auxiliary "will" stands guard over the assertions, reminding the reader that they are hypothetical. The book is filled with "will" and "would" and "if" and "given." The authors seem more reluctant than some writers on the subject to use the least candid of the theorizing verbal forms, the gnomic present: "The basic structure is perfectly just when the prospects of the least fortunate are as great as they can be" (emphasis added).¹²

5. "There might be one or more farmers whose personal preferences for road-repairing called for such large investment as to make the 'maximizing equilibrium' preferable to the 'Kantian median.'"¹³ The sentence is part of a footnote to a passage elaborating on the prisoner's dilemma for public goods. Precision in economics takes such a form, noting the exceptions and corner solutions. Doing so establishes one's character as a sharp economist, able to bend sharp curves with the best. If the reader has already accepted the excellence of the writer, the dotting of i's and crossing of t's will not be necessary. Older scholars have less need for careful footnotes, because their character has been established. The amount of arguing a scholar needs to do depends on the character he has in the minds of readers. Pierre de Fermat could set mathematicians on a three-hundred-year search for a proof by penciling a note in a margin; the ordinary Joe needs dozens of pages of explicitness to get any respect. The point is typical of rhetorical thinking. It says, "Note who the author is, in the eyes of his audience."

Limits of Modernism

So political economy uses rhetoric. But that is an imprecise way of putting the matter. Only partly do we "use" rhetoric. As Coleridge said somewhere, we do not speak the language; the language speaks us. There is no way to be "nonrhetorical," to stand entirely outside

the traditions of argument and "use" rhetoric to "communicate" the "substance" of argument. Plato dreamed of a place beyond the cave, where at least the best of us could stand outside human discourse. He assaulted the professors of his day (by the name of sophists) because they said that man, not God, was the measure of man's sayings. His hostile portrait of the sophists, incidentally, is still widely credited by the sorts of readers who take their opinions about women and the Midwest from H. L. Mencken. But rhetoric, to repeat, is not merely the ornament one adds into the speech at the end, and it is not necessarily dishonest. It is the whole of argument—its logic, its arrangement, its appeals to authority, its passion, its pointed lack of passion, its audience, its purpose, its statistics, its poetry. It goes without saying that economics and politics, and therefore political economy, are rhetorical.

The tradition of rhetoric is the alternative to the all-pervading modernism of intellectual life. Modernism, briefly put, is the methodology of advanced thinkers from 1860 to 1960. Akin to their predecessors Descartes and Plato, modernists purvey the notion that narrowing the arguments of science is good for science, because it is closer to God's way of thinking. By contrast, sloppy old rhetoric—surviving academically in law schools, English departments, and programs in speech communication—says that arguments are not God's but man's. Science is measurement, to be sure; but man is the measure. Arguments are linguistic, not physical. The conversation in an academic subject takes place in a little society, not somewhere out in the cold night of absolute truth. We human beings say what is a good argument in economics—limited by our language of $2 + 2 = 4$ and the roundness of the earth, no doubt, but with room to argue.

We cannot see into God's mind and note what He thinks about voting studies or urban politics. We decide, together, more or less reasonably, for our own purposes. There is no Archimedean point outside our intellectual culture from which to lever up the intellectual world. It would be nice if there were. But there isn't. Intellectuals in the line of Plato, Descartes, and Bertrand Russell have labored for 2,500 years to develop a formula for that Archimedean point. Their labor has produced side benefits, for which we must be thankful; but unhappily its main object has not been achieved.

The limits of modernism, despite some noble successes, have become evident to many people of late. It is worth a little to know that modernism has been on the way out for a couple of decades and that a lot of reasonable people who have examined the matter think it

moribund. One may, of course, after recognizing that modernism is an episode in Western intellectual life, wish nonetheless to adopt it, on its merits, with eyes open. Splendid. The point is to avoid adopting modernism unconsciously, in the mistaken impression that it is the only way of thinking.

The decline of modernism shows in the decline of its dichotomies: style and substance, form and content, analytic and synthetic, methods and findings, subjective and objective, values and facts, discovery and justification, and—a master dichotomy towering over them all—nonscience and science. A major project of modernism was to divide thought into nonscience and science. Unfortunately, the modernists did a better job of devising more and more elaborate demarcation criteria than in explaining why one would want to demarcate in the first place. The modernists considered it urgent to decide whether astrology or economics or history were sciences. They did not offer plausible reasons for caring. One might as well have devoted philosophical sweat to determining whether a particular field of knowledge was Christian or not. Come to think of it, holding thought up to a template of Christianity has more purpose to it—namely, personal salvation and the fulfillment of God's will on earth, both commendable purposes—than holding it up to the word "science."

There were plenty of bad reasons given or implied. For instance: Science earns a lot of money from governments and foundations, so I'd better claim to be scientific. Or, in a more dignified version: Science is prestigious, and therefore my field will not be prestigious unless I can claim it as a science. (The peculiarly English definition of science has led English speakers into extreme versions of this non sequitur. The study of politics has become economic on such grounds. A century ago, the ordering of prestige was reversed.) Or, less selfishly: Science is the only progressive field of thought, and therefore if my field is to be progressive it must be made scientific. (Defining "progressive" as "looking like what I imagine physics looked like between 1600 and 1900" makes such an argument easy to sustain.) Or, returning to the lower motivations: Science produced our riches, and therefore we should make everything scientific. Besides being another non sequitur, the history on which it is based is a fairy tale. The common belief that science had much to do with the industrial revolution, modern levels of mortality, and the other betterments of our condition up to about 1930 is erroneous.

Or, most commonly in the 1930s and 1940s, modernism was claimed as a stroke against fascism:

The most sinister phenomenon of recent decades for the true scientist . . . may be said to be the growth of Pseudo-Sciences . . . organized in comprehensive, militant and persecuting mass-creeds. . . . [The testability criterion is] the only principle or distinction . . . which will keep science separate from pseudoscience.¹⁴

In other words, an intolerant and hysterical version of modernism was to be sent out to do battle against intolerance and hysteria. The political analysis here—echoed even now in rearguard actions by neomodernists¹⁵—was always weak, not least because it was the modernists themselves (for example, Karl Pearson) who devised the pseudosciences of which Hutchison speaks: eugenics, for example, and racial anthropology—the sciences of the extermination camps. The modernists shout angrily that open discourse leads to fascism. Perhaps their anger defends them from their guilt.

Rhetoric and Logic

Rhetoric is a better protection against authoritarians. The other, official ways of dealing with arguments are too feeble to be of much use in protecting us against fascists. St. Augustine asked, "Why should [the faculty of eloquence] not be obtained for the uses of the good in the service of truth?"—and the modernist cannot answer. Parsing arguments into Logical and Illogical, to cast out the illogical, is a good idea on occasion. But it is not the universal technique that some philosophers and most laypeople who demand logic think it is. The difficulty is that most human arguments—some very good indeed—fall outside the walls of the narrowly, syllogistically logical. Inference from experiment, for instance, would be cast into the flames, as Hume pointed out two centuries ago. Analogy, too, though it runs our intellectual lives, resists reduction to syllogism. It is literally not a syllogism to say: A market is a good deal like politics; votes in Congress are political; therefore votes in Congress can be analyzed as a market.

It was Aristotle who first announced the dichotomy between syllogism (or logic) and enthymeme (or fractured syllogism, that is to say, rhetoric). The dichotomy does not work, because the certainty to which syllogism is supposed to lead does not exist. We are all rhetoricians. The mathematicians Phillip Davis and Reuben Hersh remark that "the line between complete and incomplete proof is always

somewhat fuzzy, and often controversial."¹⁶ The proof of the Pythagorean Theorem may be uncontroversial by comparison with the latest attempt to prove Fermat's Last Theorem, yet they differ only in degree. If standards of proof are debatable in mathematics, they are all the more so in political economy.

Not everyone has heard the news. The rhetoric against analogy, for example, is well exhibited by the mathematician A. Kaufman in *Introduction to the Theory of Fuzzy Subsets*:

Writing, in the sense of the theory of ordinary sets, A resembles B, B resembles C, C resembles V, . . . V resembles L, therefore A resembles L . . . constitutes a sequence of deductions without validity . . . used . . . by political men to make the best of the stupidity of certain voters. The sophists have a particular habit of making us believe in the existence of transitivity when its existence may well be doubted.¹⁷

The rhetoric of professional philosophy is a little more subtle, but comes to the same conclusion, namely, that human reasoning not reducible to strict syllogism is wrong. A philosopher will offer to *repair* an analogical argument, saying something like this: "It is helpful [the philosopher, like the man from the government, wishes above all to be helpful] to recast the argument so that it is logically valid; then all questions about its soundness can focus on the truth of the premises." This would free the philosopher to supply the missing major or minor premise. Since these are unlimited in number, he can choose one that makes the resulting argument silly or sound, as he fancies. This is the usual rhetoric the philosophers apply to "fallacies" and other arguments that their methods do not illuminate: drag the argument under the streetlight, beating it into unrecognizable form along the way. Outsiders should worry when human reasoning is said to require such rough handling.

Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst have recently pointed out a contradiction in the philosophers' rhetoric.¹⁸ They observe that repairing the allegedly incomplete argument in a hostile fashion will entail a contradiction—a contradiction at the level of the pragmatic rules necessary for speech to be possible. Speech presupposes "the maxim of cooperation" in speech, namely, that the argument can be made complete with fair ease. Yet the repaired and supposedly equivalent argument violates grossly "the maxim of quality"—that the argument is meant to be true. It violates the maxim of quality because, in being completed, the repaired version

acquires a patently untrue premise—the one so helpfully supplied by the philosopher bent on exhibiting the fallacy.

The usual way of talking about logic, in other words, leaves most argument in fallacy. For instance, *a fortiori* arguments often involve the fallacy of a suppressed premise, a premise furthermore that formal logic disavows, namely, that the comparison of cases involves an increase in rigor from minor to major. In Talmudic argument, it is called *kal ve-chomer*, the relation of weighty to trivial, the first two rules of interpretation in the rhetoric of Hillel the Elder and of Rabbi Ishmael. Miriam spoke against her half-brother Moses, for which the Lord made her leprous. Moses prayed for her to be cured, and the Lord answered, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days? [*A fortiori*, then, since she spoke against my servant Moses,] let her be shut from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again [freed of leprosy]."¹⁹ As M. Mielziner notes, "Here an inference is being made from minor to major, namely, from a human father's to the Lord's disfavor." He quotes Coke on Littleton: "What has force in a minor matter will have force in a major matter; and what does not have it in a minor matter will not have it in a major."²⁰ The common law and the religious law are systems for making decisions on some reasonable basis, as are science and scholarship. They cannot depend solely on first-order predicate logic.

Furthermore, law, science, politics, and ordinary life—even ordinary academic life—are filled with "ethical appeals," that is, arguments from the *ethos* of the speaker, from his character as known by the community. Science depends heavily on appeals to expertise, and even the derived sense of "ethics" is necessary for good science. On first glance it would appear to be strange to say that a good mathematician needs to be a good person, or that—if economists are seen to be bad people—their economics will be doubtful. But ethical appeals are made repeatedly in legal proceedings and in science, as in life. Often it is not irrelevant that a Cretan witness is a well-known liar.

A related fallacy is even more popular. Humans somehow think that the number of witnesses count, and that the proportion of witnesses on each side matters even more. The *argumentum ad populum*, when a majority claims to be right because it is the majority, has no force in strict logic but great force in actual reasoning. Socrates chides Polus for his lawyerly ways:

My gifted friend, [I reject your reasoning] because you attempt to refute me in rhetorical fashion, as they understand refuting in the law

courts. For there, one party is supposed to refute the other when they bring forward a number of reputable witnesses. . . . But this sort of refutation is quite worthless for getting at the truth; since occasionally a man may actually be crushed by the number and reputation of the false witnesses brought against him.²¹

True, occasionally one may be crushed, as was Socrates. But it is also true that people sometimes lie in questionnaires and that the sun might not come up tomorrow. Considering that the quest for philosophical certainty begun by Socrates has not yet reached its object, it would seem legitimate in the meantime to make decisions with majorities and reputations as much as with syllogisms.

One could go on in this fashion. Take down a modern elementary textbook on logic—Copi's standard book, for example—and slowly read the section on fallacies. Try to ignore the authoritarian and dismissive rhetoric with which the philosopher treats "fallacies," and ask: Are these not in fact the usual forms of reasoning? Are they wholly evil, to be exiled from serious conversation? Or should we rather make distinctions between good analogies and bad, good arguments from authority and bad, good rhetoric and bad?²²

The American Question

Rhetoric, then, gives a place to stand from which to watch the modernism in political economy and to watch how scholarly arguments actually evolve. It asserts that the categories for thinking about speaking and writing that developed in classical rhetoric (and more generally in the humanistic half of our culture) fit the scientific culture, too. Science uses metaphors and satisfying stories and appeals to authority. There is nothing wrong with doing so. To utter the word "rhetoric," we have noted, sounds like debunking. But a literary critic does not debunk Virgil when noting that Virgil used the Homeric stories as a frame. If an economist uses a metaphor of ice-cream stands along the beach to illuminate the ideological coloration of political parties, her metaphor may be apt or inapt, but she is not being unscientific.

Here is an epistemological example of what you can learn by standing in a rhetorical place. The metaphor of a game is prominent in the field of political economy. The game against nature, especially, has dominated thinking in the West since Francis Bacon. The physics model of science represents the scientist outwitting an unwitting na-

ture, and was applied wholesale to economics and political science in the age of high modernism. But whatever the definition of political economy, its subject would seem to be the game against other human beings, not against insentient nature. Mixing up the two kinds of games has had lamentable results. For instance, economic policy in the 1960s treated the public as nature, against which the policy makers were playing. In the 1970s, of course, economists began to have second thoughts, the nub being that the public is not insentient nature but an audience. In becoming aware of audiences, the very theories of political economy have taken a rhetorical turn.

The turn has an epistemological use. Suppose that one believes the \$500 Bill Axiom: that people pick up \$500 bills and other opportunities sitting free for the taking on the sidewalk. The axiom implies the theorem that there are no \$500 bills, or their equivalents in power or prestige, lying about untaken for long. The theorem suggests that any expert must answer to the American Question: If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? You, oh Expert, claim to foretell the future. Well, if you can predict the interest rate or the election outcome or the future of painting, why haven't you yourself made a million?

The upshot is that an expert in political economy cannot say certain things. In particular, she cannot claim the prediction and control that modernist science has long promised (without delivering, alas) and that some political economists still pursue. The American Question puts fundamental bounds on what humans can say about themselves. The bounds come from the saying, the rhetoric, itself. They limit mechanical models of human behavior. It does not make the mechanical models useless for interesting history or routine prediction; it just makes them useless for gaining a profitable edge on the future.

What is thrown into doubt by the American Question is a claim to systematic, justified, cheaply acquired, write-downable knowledge about profitable opportunities. The "profit" is to be broadly construed. The political economist's coin of profit need not be monetary. Political power is there on the sidewalk, too, waiting to be picked up if the 500,000 Vote Axiom is wrong. But of course the axiom is right: there is no simple way, to be written down in a book, for getting 500,000 votes. The American Question suggests that political scientists cannot predict elections in ways that would allow them to manipulate the outcome, doing better than the political artists they study. In truth, no one in political economy makes such lofty claims. It is over the border in economics that the chutzpah takes hold.

Notice the requirement of profitability. The political scientists can state true predictions all right: "A declared revolutionary socialist will not soon be elected to the House of Representatives from Orange County." But they cannot state valuable predictions: "Expenditure of \$1 million on spot commercials on Channels 2, 5, and 8 during the three weeks before an election will assure ascension to the House." If two empires fight to the death, a great empire will fall. The valuable prediction is the impossibly difficult one: which empire will prevail. This is not to say that \$1 million spent on television advertisements never won an election or that, after the election, a political scientist could not quite properly interpret the events as a victory for money and television. At one time, it was a bright new idea. After the combination won in the first congressional district, however, it would become routine in the second district and in the third and at length in the *n*th. If it were so easy to spot that a professor could say in a book how to spot it, the \$500 opportunity already would have been picked up. The supernormal profits, as economists put it, would have been dissipated. The expected return from political advice, discounted for its uncertainty, should be approximately zero.

Similarly, prestige in the local saloon would be cheaply available if the American Question did not also cast doubt on predictions of sporting events. But it does. The lineaments of the sporting future apparent to the average fellow will be reflected in the sporting odds. (At the University of Iowa during the 1988 election campaign, a pari-mutuel betting system was operated, giving minute-by-minute odds on the outcome.) Only fresh details yield profits above average, measured in money or prestige. Fresh details are hard to come by. Information, like steel and haircuts, is costly to produce.

The American Question can be asked of all predictions in economics, journalism, sociology, political science, art, and political economy. It mocks the claims of predictors, social engineers, and critics of the social arts. The predictor who could get it usefully right would be a god incarnate, a seer and diviner.

The point is not that humans are too complicated or too changeable or too free. These humanistic criticisms of social science may be true, but they are not telling; they are easy to make and easy to answer. Such complexity is merely a matter of computer time. But the complexity arising from the very rhetoric of human prediction cannot be solved by another billion dollars of computation.

All manner of provision for the future is limited by the American Question. It is closely related to another rhetorical limit on predic-

tion: that knowing science before it is known is impossible, which makes the planning of science impossible. The same holds for all manner of innovations. They cannot be planned for because in their nature they are unknowable—if they were knowable, they would be known already, and would not be innovations. The legal rule of first possession, for example, gives whoever gets there first the entitlement to land or a patent. It thus provides an incentive to throw away resources in races such as the one concluded a while ago between Kodak and Polaroid. The society would be better off if the outcome were properly discounted. The king could then auction off the entitlement to the highest bidder. But as David Haddock notes, "Where new knowledge is at issue, finding appropriate solutions becomes more complex. In such situations, one cannot define an entitlement because one cannot imagine what one has not imagined."²³

Such questions, more than merely rhetorical, bring political economy face to face with itself. They connect science to practice, observation to understanding. As Anthony Giddens notes, "That the 'findings' of the social sciences can be taken up by those to whose behavior they refer is not a phenomenon that can, or should, be marginalized, but is integral to their very nature."²⁴ The economic theory that makes an economist's model plausible tells him that he cannot expect to predict from it profitably. That people pick up \$500 bills, other things being equal, is an axiom in most economic models; it had better not be contradicted by any of them. The axiom need merely be applied to the analysis itself.

Science and Ethics

The rhetorical places to stand make it easier to see into other places. The ancient words are *koinoi topoi* in Greek and *loci communes* in Latin, "common places." These are the places humans have in common, from which to stand and hear their speech. The commonplaces are the locales of human reasoning, more capacious than the modernist parking garages that are supposed to serve for a scholarly life. To mention another example, much political economy, however defined, is storytelling; but people are usually not aware of it. The humanistic side of the scientific argument has been mislaid.

For instance, political economy in most versions is shallow ethically. The mention of ethics will be surprising if even after what we have said you nonetheless think of rhetoric as a fancy word for

empty ornament and advertising. The rhetorical places encompass ethics, beginning in the scholar's study, with the ethics of inquiry.

This is to say that sciences are practices. They are governed by human decisions about propriety, honesty, good conduct, and so forth—in sporting terms, the rules and customs and excellent performances of the game. Alasdair MacIntyre defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity.” In his Aristotelian way, he argues that each practice creates standards of excellence, “goods internal to that form of activity.” In defining the practice, these standards define also our wider notions of excellence, “with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”²⁵ Excellence in basketball, defined by the practice of the Boston Celtics, extends our conception of excellence itself. So too in science and scholarship. The practices of recognized scientists provide standards for the Good Scientist. The Good Scientist contributes to our idea of the Good Person. As Emerson put it, the Thinking Man, a mere expert, becomes Man Thinking. Even the method of science, in other words, is saturated in ethics.

When economists and political scientists, having skimmed Karl Popper, say that their hypotheses should be falsifiable, they fancy it is sheer logic that guides them, not rhetoric or ethic. Yet they have said it; and they have used “should.” The logicians reduce complex practices to a few incantations of Method. Yet the methodologists are calling on shared traditions, without realizing they are. The traditions of criticism in science make up its rhetoric.

Ethics used to be known as the practical science of communal life. The Greeks named it for its attention to *ethos*, character. “Ethical” is what pertains to the characteristic or habitual, as against the methodically intellectual. Rhetorically, as we have said, *ethos* is the character and disposition of a speaker, as impressed on the hearers by his speech. So ethics is what pertains to *ethos*; and rhetoric (as what pertains to the speaker or actor) is the consideration of what it is proper to say and do. In judging the relations of speaker to audience and actor to community, good rhetorics include ethics.

The trouble is that modern notions of morality reduce these issues of practical, communal judgment to abstractions. The model for ethical thinking is Kantian. The Kantians answer an ethical question with some rule that devalues the practical and the rhetorical. They attack rhetoric for introducing subtleties that confuse people—the subtleties of actual cases at law or actual decisions to send an expedi-

tion to Syracuse. Rhetoric, being practical, is said to be immoral and antiethical. But this is the reverse of the truth. Rhetoric is the study of the public side of *ethos*, the character revealed by speech. The Kantian program to found ethics on universal propositions has not made us any better, or better off. It has failed.

Recent students of rhetoric emphasize a further lesson: our sins and vanities of inference owe far less to flaws in the instruments or even the motivations of persuasion than to defects in the knowledge and character of their consumers. In our experiences, scholars who declare the standing of the scientist irrelevant to the merit of the paper are among the readers most swayed by implicit appeals to authority. Likewise, those who reject any proper role for rhetoric in science are among the scholars least sensitive to subtle abuses of statistics. Therefore, let the user of analogy or any speech be also the good person skilled at listening.

Political economy, in all its definitions, has tended to discount politics, and the wider moral discourse of which politics is a part, as mere talk—reducing it to something else. Some Marxists reduce politics to words and words to material interest, as do some bourgeois theorists. Others reduce politics to rationality, simply conceived, or to the nation emergent or to the balance of pluralistic interests. All these political economists want to get beyond mere words, which they view as ephemeral and false, to something more real underneath. The real, they think, can be manipulated, as the levers of power and history. But the distinctively political part is just words, and the words are just rhetoric.

The rhetoric is the main asset of a political culture, as durable as any of its goods and as consequential as any of its institutions. The institutions consist largely of agreements about how to talk—addressing all remarks to the Speaker of the House or submitting a military budget to arguments among civilians. This position is not antirealist. The world is still round, and the table still stands against the wall. But realism does not require that we attribute nothing to the ways we talk about politics. It is a naive realist who thinks that logic or science requires us to scorn ideas. Nor is the position unrealistic in the common sense of the word: evil still exists, and the con man still depends on his statistics. But realistic politics need not be *Realpolitik*.

The best protection against bad science is good scientists in good disciplines, aware of the rhetoric in their inquiry. Methods are no protection against misuse. That is why good rhetorics encompass the ethics of their practices. But rhetoric can exhibit the virtues as much

as the vices of the modern academy. Better than modernism or scientism, rhetoric fits most visions of the good society. Political economists study machineries for making constitutions and revealing preferences, but their studies would lack point if honest rhetoric were rendered impossible. If all talk were perverse, all persuasion would be impossible. If no one could be persuaded, if everyone were motivated merely by the pocketbook or the voting booth, we would be entirely alone. We are not, and the way we talk politically to each other is rhetoric.