

## Economic Science and Postmodernism: Ethics Return\*

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**Abstract.** *The ideas have a fundamental importance for world's destiny. Within the human civilization world of thinking, the scientific ideas represent the essence of logical structure of human mind and the truths about the human action and society that can be discovered by man. In this approach, I will argue why the scholar honest-mindedness must be his principle in life. In world's vision about post-modernity, the only faith today is that everything is relative or otherwise stated that there is no ultimate criterion for making absolute hierarchies in order to distinguish truth from false. Thus has gradually appeared the less desired idea that ethical standards represent simple social conventions, fact that would impede the possibility of ethically validating a multitude of "alternative institutional arrangements", including the ones contradictory with human nature and individual freedom. This study represents a plea for the virtues of logic and faith in truth and justice. Moreover, the original signification of the word "science" – scientia – is correct knowledge. Bearing this clarification in mind, the researchers would maybe become more responsible in calling any approach as being a "scientific" one and implicitly they would become more exigent with their own creations.*

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Acquiring *correct knowledge* is not an axiomatic exercise in itself, aimed at building those judgements, ideas, theories that have the capacity to challenge time and space; to *do science* implies in the same time to discover and to eliminate all the errors that the human mind is able to identify and eliminate, fact that shows the necessity of combating the erroneous ideas whose imposition and popularisation generates poverty and conflict, as history shows. The example of failed “social engineering”, such as socialism or economic nationalism, proves that in science things unfortunately happen as they do in life: not always scientists that deserve to be renowned are renowned and not always those that have a good reputation deserve it. I thus express my fear that the *relativist world* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such that it was characterised by the famous historicist Paul Johnson, finds itself in the academic field under a relativism of knowledge, fact that easily undermined the credibility of the scientific intellectual exercise.

In contrast with the correct knowledge, it can be actually remarked a certain type of anti-intellectualism that parasites not only the evolution of science, but also the culture – at the most general and sensible level of addressability. This worrying evolution can be translated through the abandonment of individual conscience in the “collective” state identity, through the erosion of the individual autonomy spirit, through the disaggregation of the individual by today’s mass minorities (ethnic, political, cultural, sexual, etc.) The phrase “think with your own mind” had probably become out of fashion and in equal manner useless since the life and the human problems end up in ready-mixed models in the social hierarchy. The scientific world itself has gradually become captive of a sort of “scientism” whose nature finally proves to be “anti-scientific”<sup>(1)</sup>. Should it be all about a scientist assault over logic, over rational judgement? Or should it be about optimizing good by underlining bad?

In world’s vision about post-modernity, the only faith is that no essential reality exists; that everything is relative or otherwise stated that there is no ultimate criterion for making hierarchies in order to distinguish truth from false. The question of concern is whether this intellectual relativism perverts the full affirmation of the human personality and of fair social institutions or disqualifies the scientific act through popularising in an interesting manner a faith that is obviously misleading, regarded through the eye of correct scientific knowledge.

The confusion between the relativity theory and making the theory relative, as a method, has contributed to making both truth and justice relative – however these philosophical categories cannot ontologically exist separately. The word of order has become tolerance above the necessary human spirit: we gradually learned to tolerate ignorance, superficiality, lack of morality, even fraud – if it is legal and derives from the discretionary “democratic” governmental power. The inevitable consequence lies in the multitude of dilemmas that actually suffocate the moral and cultural values: cloning,

abortions, ecological problems, euthanasia, freedom of opinion, arms possession, prostitution and homosexuality, immigration, social security, sustainable development, war and terrorism, etc. The example of war is the illustration of the fact that many things of which people knew and learned that were bad are sometimes considered to be appropriate. The reciprocal is unfortunately valid as well regarding some ethical values that have ensured for centuries the very basis of the human civilisation. In this manner arises the impossibility of stating a principle argument for or against ideas and phenomena, irrespective of how incorrect and lacked of logic they may be<sup>(2)</sup>.

These confusions mostly bear the mark of multiculturalism and postmodernism as central academic movements of the contemporary society. Steven Yates shows that the major anxiety of postmodernism has its source in the incertitude regarding the virtues of truth, fact that explains both the lack of interest and the refusal to accept its existence. Under these circumstances it is easily understood why the academic discourse became captured of arbitrary, circumstantial arguments whose essence lies in interpreting whatever inequality as injustice and reducing the superior to inferior in all spheres of diversity. In the context of this harmonization tendency towards inferiority and egalitarianism, spreading the idea that participative democracy represents the indisputable cure for all the problems of the actual society highly contributed to consolidating a popular philosophy of indifference and superficiality.

If the essence of relativism is that “everything is relative, there is no absolute truth”, what are the arguments standing for trusting this assumption? If the relativist would apply his doctrine starting with his own assumptions, following the hypothesis that there is no way to decide which position is correct and which is not, the result would be that the relativist axiom does not represent anything else than a simple, arbitrary game of words. What is then the use of the researchers’ efforts, struggling to formulate judgements, theories, fighting to amend certain rationing, as long as any theory is as good (relative) as anybody else’s?<sup>(3)</sup>

The intellectual absurdity of scientific relativism is expressed through the denial tendency of whatever elementary principles of analytic knowledge. This is exactly equivalent with the very denial of the natural laws of the human society, even of the laws of physics that describe the functioning of the universe. For example, postulating the truth of an economic reasoning which is lastly deductible to trivial evidence (of the type of “ $1+1=2$ ” axiom) is met with reserves, sometimes on the paradoxical ground that mathematicians did not say their final word regarding the validity of the arithmetic operation “ $1+1=2$ ”<sup>(4)</sup>. Such a credo undermines the scientific realisations that have been rooted over centuries in even the matrix of the human civilisation.

For example, we put the problem of the capacity of the scientist to answer the question “if a healthy apple plus a rotten one always equal two apples”. The

anatomy of the above arithmetic shows a different result. *For the scientist* “1+1” will always equal “2” because the human mind is logically structured on the fundamental ground of “unity”. Moreover, the real scientist is the one that *does not add up* one healthy apple with a rotten one, an honest person with a criminal, a governed with a governor, an exploited person with an exploiter, etc. For scientific knowledge such an arithmetic exercise is not only irrelevant, but also a generator of confusion and error. However, for the *politician* the implications of arithmetic are easily quantifiable. For example, by adding up a healthy apple with a rotten one, he may declare that... the standard of living has increased; by adding up the millions of the millionaire with the zeros of the beggar, the politician will say that the “society” is generally ok!

The postmodernist thinking managed to forget whole centuries of rational thinking, periods of systematically employing the logic in the search for truth. The Greek idea that something precise can be said only about the things that are time independent dominated the philosophical thought until modernity decided to embrace Nietzsche’s request for “revaluing all the values”<sup>(5)</sup>. In the post-modern world the humans are not convinced that gaining knowledge is a good thing in itself. For Aristotle knowledge offers power; Francis Bacon is the one that programmatically postulated that “knowledge is power”. Being in the middle of the process of “democratically revaluing all the values”, the contemporary society reversed the identity of Bacon into “power is knowledge in the same time”. If the pre-industrial society understood the identity towards science, the post-industrial society interprets science as power<sup>(6)</sup>. As Zygmunt Bauman (1992, Chapter VII) writes, “Postmodernism... does not aim at substituting one truth with another one, one beauty standard with other, one life ideal with other. More than this, it divides the truth, the standards and the ideas in parts that have lost their structure and parts that will lose their structure. (...) He proclaims himself for a life without truth, standards or ideals”.

The removal of ideals, faiths and criteria manifests in recent times mostly in which regards the relation between science and deity. The scientific objectivity that protects a lot of utopia has to exclude all that it does not assume. Not randomly have scientists and reputed intellectuals from recent history less things in common with ethics than with atheism<sup>(7)</sup>. This tendency appears due to the fact that the scientific idea is not to believe in God, and thus the perception that God does not exist. Science cannot identify God, because it excludes Him from the start and any demonstration cannot find just the things it assumed in the beginning hypotheses: “the argument of revelation critics is thus circular: in order to prove the falsity of the Bible, they assumed from the very beginning that the Bible is fake, that, otherwise stated, the Bible cannot base itself on the existence of miracles” (Patapievici, 2002, p. 71). However, despite the fact that early Christianity, including the Bible, had an ambivalent attitude,

sometimes even contradicting economic laws, the religious faith is almost always put into an ethical-judicial framework that the economist cannot ignore, as I will prove in the final part of this study.

One of the important sources of the scientific relativism, especially in the field of social sciences, lays in the fact that history rather than theory is the one that managed to attract attention. Each individual, each tribe, each population was seen as owner of its own history. Since no absolute standards of good and bad existed back then, all histories were appreciated as being equally valuable (historical relativism). Through history it was not intended the expression of some judgement about the past or forecasting the future, but the revelation of multiculturalism, of human tradition diversity. Hans-Hermann Hoppe (1997, p. 1) writes that “according to historicism, there is nothing “good” or “bad” from an ethical point of view, all ethical judgements being considered subjective. Moreover, with the possible exception of logic, mathematics, and natural sciences laws, there are no positive universal laws. Economics and sociology are just a history, a sequence of past actions and events of which you can learn nothing else than the fact that “that’s the way things happened”.

The new political and cultural universe of modern society leaves no room for the traditional conception regarding logic, which is that logic is the same for everybody, since the human nature is the same, irrespective of the skin colour, sex, nationality, religion, etc. Gradually the multiculturalism doctrine transformed the very idea of logic, considering that logic is no longer the same for everybody, but a multi-polar logic, derived not from universal criteria, but from sexual, cultural, ethnic and circumstantial ones<sup>(8)</sup>.

A new faith seems to dominate the academic thought of the last century. I am talking about the doctrine that Ludwig von Mises identifies through the denomination of polilogism. This appears as the conjugated result of historicism and empiricist positivism, philosophies that in fact undermine the *a priori* methodological basis of economic science. For example, historicism assumes that the logical structure of human mind and of the thinking process is subject to change during the historical evolution, whereas the racial polilogism attributes to each race its own logic. In essence, the central thesis of polilogism, in its Marxist version, is that there are two types of logic, one for the occidental civilization and one for the cultures that are subject to its “exploitation”, or, in relativist version, that there is logic for each culture and historical context. However, as the economic science and history proved, the Marxist polilogism is a failed strategy to save the unsustainable doctrines of socialism, through the substitution of logical reasoning with intuition, attractive attempt for those inclined to popular superstitions? This is the reason for which Mises (1966, p. 85) shows that “the attitude that puts the Marxist polilogism and its product,

“the sociology of knowledge”, in an irreconcilable antagonism vis-à-vis the science and the reasoning”.

For example, the idea that Marxism is a science appears strongly rooted in the intellectual environment of many countries, especially in the countries that had something to do with the socialist experiment, despite its dramatic failure. The great historic Paul Johnson (2002, p. 82) shows that the phenomenon spread also in the non-Marxist world, “due to the fact that intellectuals, and especially academicians, are fascinated by power, whereas the identification of Marxism with a powerful physic authority tempted several professors to accept the Marxist “science” in their disciplines, especially in the non-exact or quasi-exact fields such as economics, sociology, history and geography”. It is possible that if the war for Central and Eastern Europe would have been gained by Hitler rather than Stalin, thus ending up with the implementation of his own policies over a great part of the world, the Nazi doctrine (which pretended itself to be scientific, according to the racial theory it sustained) would have had an academic allure and would have entered all the universities in the world. The military victory however ensured the imposition of the Marxist “science”<sup>(9)</sup>. However, what can be “scientific” in Marx’s writings or in the Nazi doctrine? The undesired experiment of the “rationally planned society” meant in reality the exit of the human society from the human framework and its regression back in history, in the animal world of slavery, totalitarianism and state exploitation.

In the middle of these problems has gradually appeared the less desired idea that ethical standards represent simple social conventions, fact that would impede the possibility of ethically validating a multitude of *alternative institutional arrangements*. However, the contradiction comes from the very fact that this approach ignores the exigencies of the simplest test: the uniqueness character and the universality of human nature, of natural laws to which the entire human being conforms to. In this sense, the universal charter of human rights made history not because it referred to “people” and attributed them “rights”, but because it strongly and finally assumed that the human rights are written in his very nature and are thus *universal*. The fact that there are relativists sustaining the human rights that do not even realize the inconsistency of their position represents the typical confusion of post-modern epoch (Patapievici, 2001 p. 401).

It is irrefutable the fact that the polilogist argument represents nothing else than a dissembled attack towards the economic science, a relativist exercise of sublimating the “correct knowledge”, especially in the field of economic policies. Socialists, racists, nationalists and statists failed in their attempts to reject the economists’ theories and to prove the correctness of their mystifying doctrines. This very frustration is the one that stimulated them to deny the logical and epistemological principles on which the entire human thinking is based, both in economic activities and in scientific research<sup>(10)</sup>. In the end the validity of *a priori*

fundamentals of logic and economic science cannot be proven without making a reference to these very fundamentals. Rationality is the primary, natural given of the human being, the existence as such of human rationality being in itself a non-rational fact. The only assumption that can be formulated with respect to reasoning is that it represents the distinctive feature that separates man from animals and that attracts with it everything that is specific to humans.

Rationality is, in fact, the only method that researchers have at their disposal, the same method through which can be argued the unacceptable character of scientific relativism and through which can be proven that there are positive universal laws of (economic) science and ethical truths on which the human civilization is grounded. Obviously I do not want to suggest the fact that rationality can ever make a man know everything. Irrespective of how much would knowledge increase, there will always be things having the statute of last data, which are not destined to any additional clarifications. The only sure thing is that rationality and science can foster human progress and are able to prepare a future of good and justice.

The majority of scientists share the faith that *an objective theory of justice* is impossible based on universal ethical principles. Obsessed by the efficiency criterion and by the maximising paradigm, the neoclassic scientism from economic theory asserts that not only the means and methods used by each individuals are subjective, but anything else too. Under these assumptions, the science, *the correct knowledge* stops being a science at all and in the absence of objective criteria any intellectual approach is subject to relativity. However, this means the disappearance of borders between justice and injustice, between truth and falsity – the most secure means for dissolving the basis of the human civilization. *Anyhow the economic science teaches us that not the ethics principles are those that are subjective, but utilities and costs are subjective economic categories.*

Irrespective of the mutations that appear at the level of the technologies in economic life and irrespective of how “old” or “new” is the actual economics, the ethical character of human action and the framework in which it manifests remain indispensable. Economic life is a huge network of exchanges which at their fundamental level do not represent exchanges of goods as such, but exchanges of property rights over the goods under question. This proves that any theory of the exchange (of the market) has to be consolidated, as preliminary fact, by the (legitimate) theory of property rights, and thus the need to know the content of law and to argue the justice and legitimacy of these laws. “*The right to property*” or “*property rights*”? – this is the great challenge of political philosophy and of economics. This is the reason for which the fundamental question to which the *science* has to find an answer is: how can the society be designed such that institutional order to be ethic and just, and to what extent does this institutional arrangement support the creation of wealth and material welfare?

I do consider that the economic science has to be sensitive to the *nature* of individual objectives and to the means employed for their accomplishment. I hereby formulate a plea for the ethical dimension of economics. The economic science is an ethical science, mostly on the basis of compulsory distinctions that appear at the level of purposes that individuals have to follow and implicitly of the means that he is legitimately empowered to use in his actions<sup>(11)</sup>. Since economics operates in the institutional framework of inter-human relations, then the ethical dimension of these relations is an indispensable one. Economic theory and history show us that the creation of wealth naturally implies an ethical character through the very peaceful nature of the means employed, social cooperation through production and *voluntary* exchange of legitimate property rights, not through aggression, violence and expropriation, which are lacked of legitimacy.

Defining the sphere of correct (incorrect) actions constitutes the natural results of creating and enforcing the *institution of rights* that has in this way become the biggest invention of humans in their entire history, through the very fact that this institution made possible the formation and the existence of society. Only in this manner it becomes possible to define the infringements of rights, under the form of interferences in the control that an individual legitimately exercises over his properties.

Human reasoning has the capacity to discover the (natural) law, starting with the profound tendencies of human nature that are absolute, immutable and universally valid in all time and place. This means that the natural law offers an *objective ensemble of ethical norms* for evaluating the legitimacy of human actions at any time and under any circumstances (Rothbard, 1991). In this manner the rational natural right becomes the necessary guide for the nascence of the positive system of law and/or for reforming the existing legal arrangements, due to the fact that the theorists of natural right derive from the very human nature and from the natural laws, a law system independent of epoch and place, but also independent of customs, traditions and collective values.

After Max Weber the dominant position in social sciences, at least *de jure*, was the one of Wertfreiheit, the idea that science does not have to incorporate value judgements but positive (objective) statements, due to the fact that the end goals wouldn't be anything else but personal preferences that are susceptible of a rational justification. The fact that J.M. Keynes affirmed that economic science is a moral science did not impeached him to contribute, through his political implications of his work, at the destroying of the ethical character of economic science. Unfortunately, the conception of classical philosophy according to which a system of rational norms and scientific moral values is possible has been completely abandoned.

Today, the result is the conservation of a positive pseudo-economy, based not on the value judgements of the scientist, but on a supposed consensus over



others' values. The idea that the value judgements that are necessary to the scientific approach are those of the "population" literally suffocates the social sciences. Thus, the scientific objectivity would not comprise the search for truth – whatever it may be – but the matching of conclusions with others' subjectivity, whatever little advised would they be. However, it has to be understood that value judgements do not become right or legitimate through the fact that a great number of persons adopt those convictions. Very often the scientist is associated with a "professional" asked to offer to his clients – to the public – the most adequate recipes for attaining their goals (whatever they may be?). In reality the problem is correctly stated once it is accepted *the impossibility of avoiding to choose between good and bad*. The scientist, whose ultimate purpose is the correct knowledge, cannot ignore the ethical dimension of the teachings that his research promotes.

*Ethics is the rule of legitimate property rights*, the rule of justice, of freedom in society. Only ethical principles can provide objective criteria for consolidating life in society, by solving the potential conflicts. This implies the sanctioning of those that aim at the attainment of other purposes than the legitimate ones. Life in society implies something more than the demand expressed by neoclassical economists: the best manner of satisfying the needs, which for some would mean steal, fraud, violence and exploitation. Not any purpose can be accepted and not any means that lead to this purpose can be allowed.

Under these assumptions the only fundamental criterion that may save the scientific nature of the economy is that provided by *ethics*<sup>(12)</sup>. The economic judgements become complete when they are complemented with ethics, since economics, laws and ethics are naturally correlated and represent the means for the correct understanding of the human society.

Almost all problems formulated in this article explain and reflect the epistemological and methodological crisis that characterise the actual evolution of science, with the consequence of its depersonalisation. If the things really converge in this manner than it seems that the practical solution can be only one like the teachings of Poincaré: "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" in the sense of generalizing the validity of this teaching and, in the same time, of correct theories. I do consider that the interest to make up a good, correct theory, whatever the conclusions and the implications of it may be, has to represent the milestone of whatever scientific approach and also the honesty proof of each scientist.

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## Notes

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- (1) Almost all that is written actually in the field of economics is presented both to the academic world and to the public debate under the wrapping of “scientific product”. Irrespective of how logic or contradictory is the rationing in these writings, they are nonchalantly put under the scientific umbrella. As a result, it seems that everything one thinks about his/her object of research is scientific. Very often completely opposing theories, theories that offer contradictory explanations for the same economic phenomenon, are tolerated as being “scientific” despite the fact that it is easily understood that not all writings are correlated with the correct knowledge of science. Clearly this gradually leads to the decrease in the value of science, being it utopian or lacked of logic. For example, the term “scientific” was often used by Marx in order to distinguish himself from his ideological adversaries. “He and his work were “scientific”; the others weren’t” (Johnson, 2002, p. 81).
- (2) For example, once an empiric-positivist theory is adopted we find ourselves in the impossibility of formulating some principle arguments against some unfortunate events that flagellated the human civilization, such as war, socialism, holocaust...
- (3) There exists the faith that the major purpose of the scientist is not to educate (that is to offer logical frames for the principles that save the human society from chaos, poverty and moral disorder) but to “open the minds of the young”. The problem lies in the fact that the mind of people can be opened up using different means, not all of them being equally desirable for the peaceful life of the individual in society. My plea is that we don’t have to be indifferent to the means in which the professors “open up the mind” of our children, if their “lessons” instigate to violence, racism, political exploitation, war, or if they are aimed at protecting the life and the fundamental ideals of people.
- (4) For the extreme relativist the result of a mathematical operation is arbitrary, “1+1” could equal “3”, “100”, “1176” and (why not?) an infinite. Do we make a mistake when we teach our children in schools that “1+1=2” or that, according to elementary logic, “you cannot eat this pie and keep it for later in the same time”? If the relativist says that “1+1” may equal “5”, would he be willing to give up a banknote of 500 EUR in exchange for 2 banknotes of 100 EUR in order to protect his own credo? Even in the situation in which he would accept this monetary sacrifice, wouldn’t he just diminish the means employed for his own purposes, thus contrary to his credo?
- (5) The classical Greek thought culminating in the works of Aristotle gave the Westerners a profound rationalist attitude: the perception of humans as *rational* animals, the highest respect for logic and logical thought, a strong faith in the existence of the natural law and of the cognoscibility of human and nature, a strong realism and the “human spirit” (Hoppe, 1997).
- (6) Thus, postmodernism has its roots in the complete politization of the social life, as H.R. Patapievici (2001, p. 133) shows: “the essence of the postmodern agenda (...) is fundamentally politic. However, the political scope of the postmodern assertion is to remove any reference to universal and to bring the human sciences in the situation in which in the future any reference to universality, coming from a serious researcher, would seem to the great public and to the intellectual community as dual, dangerous and fundamentalist as a return to God’s church today, in the democratic politics.
- (7) See Paul Johnson, 2002.
- (8) For example the Marxist theory suggests that the human’s thinking is determined by his class affiliation. Each social class would have inherited its own logic. The products of

thought can thus be nothing else but an “ideological mask” of egoistic class interests of the thinker. In the Marxist opinion, the Ricardian theory of comparative costs has no fundamentals due to the fact that Ricardo was a bourgeois. German racists condemn the same theory due to the fact that Ricardo was a Jew, whereas German nationalists do the same on the ground that he was British.

- (9) The arrival of nihilism for Nietzsche and the distributive logic of capitalism for Marx seem to have the same signification, such that “if the philosophic prophet of postmodernism was Nietzsche, its economic prophet has indubitably been Marx” (Patapievici, 2001, p. 146)
- (10) The real scientist is not allowed to reject the “relativist objections” (a flagrant contradiction in fact) only through invoking the partisan prejudices that inspired them. In order to discover the errors, the scientist has no other arsenal than logic, the only mental instrument that can stay at the basis of “correct knowledge”. Ludwig von Mises (1966:91) shows that “to remove a theory through invoking its historical origins, the “spirit” of the times in which it was formulated, the material conditions from its country of whatever personal particularities of its authors is a helpless strategy. A theory is not subjected but to the tribute of reasoning. The adequate criterion for analysing it is always the reasoning criterion. A theory is either correct either incorrect. It is possible that in the actual state of our knowledge not to have the possibility to decide regarding its fairness or lack of fairness. However a theory can never be valid for both a bourgeois and an American and invalid for a proletarian and a Chinese.
- (11) Not any preference can be accepted and not any type of action that would have as a result its satisfying is allowed; this is the reason for adding the attribute “legitimate” next to “means” and “goals”. The initiation of interpersonal relations (or equivalently the formation of society) implies something more than the demand of satisfying the best all the needs, expressed by all economists after Menger, Walras and Jevons.
- (12) See Murray Rothbard (1991), [www.mises.org/rothbard/ethics/ethics.asp](http://www.mises.org/rothbard/ethics/ethics.asp). Rothbard is the first “Austrian” that systematically recommends the utilitarian position dominant in the economic science, position represented by Mises himself in the tradition of the Austrian school of economics. The Misesian plea for the free market was argued for in a utilitarian manner, somehow empiric, through its superior efficiency. In reality the debate over the free market system has to be mainly based on ethical arguments and not necessarily (maybe just complementary) on economic efficiency ones.

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