

AMERICAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT: 1820–1850

BY
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Classical political economy in Great Britain was broadly supportive of education, but limited government's role to modest assistance for charitable schools. The early classical economists in the United States, men like Thomas Cooper and Francis Wayland, in addition to supporting free trade, took this classical position with respect to education. But a more aggressive democratic claim was being advanced by the American common school movement and its supporters among Whig protectionists. The early economic tracts of William Jennison, Willard Phillips, Calvin Colton, and Henry Carey envisioned a larger role for government and advocated support for publicly financed common schools. Most notably, the leader of the common school movement, Horace Mann, built a defense for public financing based on a radical theory of property, derived from distinctly Puritan economic doctrine. If his radical positions received little support from post-Civil War mainstream economists, Mann's practical advocacy of public taxation for public schools very much carried the day.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the nineteenth century, American economists began to explore a range of policy questions related to the development of their new nation (Conkin 1980). Debates over national policies loomed large in their discussions. Slavery, internal improvements, tariff policy, and centralized banking structures all received extensive attention from the emerging political economists. Perhaps because its battles were fought out at the state and local levels, the question of public education

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received only modest consideration from the first American economists. While all these scholars were supportive of education in the abstract, most failed to embrace the growing common school movement in the northern states. Following the lead of the British classical school, the early American classical economists endorsed the private financing of education, supplemented with public funds only for the impoverished. In taking this position, they ran contrary to one of the major democratic innovations of the new country. And they failed to seriously engage the creative political economy of the most famous American educational reformer, Horace Mann. In doing so, they maintained classical orthodoxy, even as they failed to grasp the democratic meaning of Mann's effort. The major exceptions to this rule were staunch supporters of protection, who saw in public education a tool for nation building.

II. THE BRITISH CLASSICAL TRADITION

Adam Smith's ideas on education have long been considered as prescient by economists.¹ Smith consistently emphasized the role of education in shaping character and capacity (Peart and Levy, 2005). In a famous passage late in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith worried that the division of labor he so celebrated early in that volume had a darker side. A worker, once confined to the continuous repetition of a few simple tasks, never could develop as a full person: "The torpor of his mind renders him ... incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation...." Such a worker was hardly fit for citizenship. "Of the great and extensive interests of his country, he is altogether incapable of judging;" (Smith 1904, vol. 2, p. 267). The upper and middling classes could afford their own educations and in general were not subjected to such mind-numbing work. But "in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it" (p. 267).

Smith's solution drew on his familiarity with the local schools of his native Scotland. England at the time had a very partial and unstandardized system of charity and "ragged" schools for the poor. Smith argued for the establishment of "parish or district little schools, where children may be taught for a reward so moderate, that even a common labourer may afford it; ..." These schools would generally require public subsidies. But he insisted the subsidies must be partial. The master must not be "wholly paid by the publick; because if he was wholly, or even principally paid by it, he would soon learn to neglect his business" (p. 270).

Smith's conception of mixed financing for open elementary schools became the general recommendation of almost all the British classical economists. Thomas Robert Malthus explicitly endorsed Smith's plan, adding only that the poor should be fully instructed in "the real state of the lower classes of society, as affected by the principle of population, and their consequent dependence on themselves for the chief part of

¹Smith's approach to education has been discussed by Miller (1966) and West (1975).

their happiness or misery.” In supporting Smith’s argument, Malthus offered evidence that where the working classes were more educated, crime rates were lower. The usefulness of educational subsidies in preventing crime among the poor became a constant refrain among classical economists.² Malthus also emphasized that educated workers were less likely to be attracted to radical doctrines like those of Thomas Paine³ (Malthus 1826, vol. 2, bk. IV, ch. IX).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, classical economic thought on education was dominated by three, major, utilitarian thinkers: Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill. Like Smith, they staunchly held to the role of nurture in building character and intelligence.⁴ They each supported the political reform program of philosophic radicalism, which emphasized the expansion of the franchise and civil rights. Yet, for the most part, they held closely to the cautious classical tradition that limited state subsidies for education to small amounts aimed at the very poor.⁵

Both James Mill and Bentham were actively involved in practical reforms surrounding the Lancaster system of schools. The Lancaster schools were named after Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker who, with Mill’s help, obtained considerable political support.⁶ Lancaster proposed a form of assembly-line education for students. In rooms holding several hundred pupils, education was to be parceled out by a single instructor aided by a cadre of monitors drawn from older students.⁷ It seems political economists have long hoped to improve the efficiency of the schoolhouse.

Committed to *laissez-faire*, the utilitarians held that consumers were generally the best judges of their own welfare. However, since the working classes were unlikely to fully appreciate the value of education to their children and the community at large, the utilitarians allowed that the state must take some action on their behalf. Of course, such action must be highly targeted and, as John Stuart Mill made clear, a “despotic” state monopoly of elementary education could not be tolerated (Mill 1965, bk. V, ch. XI).⁸

Given Mill’s insistence that parents bear a major share of the responsibility for their children’s education, it is somewhat curious that he didn’t emphasize the considerable private returns to education. While all the classical economists acknowledged these

²A refrain that continues today; see Heckman (2010).

³Despite his radicalism, Paine had opposed general public education and instead proposed a system of subsidizing the education of the English poor quite similar to that supported by Smith and Malthus (Paine 1791; West 1975).

⁴James Mill developed extensively a theory of associational psychology and education broadly conceived. His basic conclusion was that humans are made by their experience far more than by any intrinsic differences. In this conclusion he strongly supported the position of the French philosopher Helvetius. For his psychology, Mill drew heavily on the work of David Hartley (Mill 2010).

⁵Again, see Miller (1966) and West (1975) for discussions of these classical economists’ views on education. Also see Itzkin (1978) on Bentham’s notions on middle-class education.

⁶Lancaster later fell from grace over his lack of financial acumen (Taylor 1996). He then traveled to the New World, where his efforts again attracted the interest of political economists. See below.

⁷This was, after all, the age of Bentham with his Panopticon, promoted for factories, prisons, and schools.

⁸Mill did allow that the state might enforce a requirement of “universal education,” even though it shouldn’t take on the responsibility of directly providing that education (Mill 1977, ch. V).

returns, the only one to stress their importance was Nassau Senior.⁹ Indeed, Senior was buoyantly optimistic about the promise of such returns. In his vision, “There appears no reason to doubt that, as civilization advances, every person will receive an education which will materially increase his power of production.” Contrasting English workers who had achieved some education to uneducated Irish immigrants, Senior argued that without their schooling, the former “who are now earning 40s. a-week as mechanics, might have been breaking stones and carrying hods at 2s. a-day” (Senior 1854, p. 134).

Senior went further. He developed the hints in Smith as to the investment/capital nature of education. What is now labeled “human capital” he called “personal capital.” He considered the return on this capital to be “profit.” And he left no doubt as to which type of capital was more important for production and future growth: “[T]he intellectual and moral capital of Great Britain far exceeds all her material capital, not only in importance, but even in productiveness....” Of the profit on capital, “the portion which is mere interest on material capital probably does not amount to one-third. The rest is the result of personal capital, or, in other words, of education” (Senior 1854, p. 134).

Presumably, these returns accruing to the owners of human capital would strengthen the classical case for school fees. However, they played little role in that argument. The classical case against state provision was more concerned with a fear of state control and inefficiency than with any identification of private beneficiaries.

The classical outlook on education was well summarized by the reformer and school administrator Dr. James Kay, later James Kay-Shuttleworth after his marriage to Lady Janet Shuttleworth. Recommended by Nassau Senior, Kay eventually moved up to be the first secretary of the Ministry of Education established in 1839. In an oft-quoted passage, he made an iconic statement of the utilitarian argument:

a weekly payment from the parents of scholars is that form of taxation, the justice of which is most apparent to the humbler classes.... To shift the burthen of the School pence to a tax on spirits, tobacco, barley or malt, would be an evasion unworthy of a statesman, embarrassing to the revenue, productive of ultimate discontent, and otherwise demoralizing.... The moral advantage of a Tax on the poor in the form of School pence is, that it appeals to the sense of paternal duty. It enforces a lesson of domestic piety.... Nor can the paternal charities of a wise commonwealth be substituted, for the personal ties of parental love and esteem, without undermining society at its base.... The parent should not be led to regard the School as the privilege of the citizen, so much as another scene of household duty. (Kay-Shuttleworth 1853, pp. 294–295)

Kay-Shuttleworth’s position, with its emphasis on domestic piety, reflects the deep underlying classical concern with social stability.

In conclusion, the British classical economists and the practical reformers who drew on their works, from the late eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century, supported the expansion of education and cautiously endorsed state support for such an expansion with respect to the poorer classes, but were hostile to the general provision of education through free state schools.

⁹Senior, a member along with the Mills of the Political Economy Club, broadly subscribed to the pragmatic outlook and purposes of utilitarianism. However, among classical economists, he stood out for his criticisms of Malthus, Ricardo, and J. S. Mill. He is sometimes classified as a “proto-marginalist.” See De Marchi (1987).

III. AMERICAN CLASSICAL ECONOMISTS

Political economy was popular in the new nation, and scholars both north and south generated numerous volumes of lectures, principles, and elements.¹⁰ In the first half of the nineteenth century, these texts were widely used in the country's colleges. Much of this work was derivative of British models. In this vein, American classical economists echoed the endorsement of education that the British economists had mounted. And, for the most part, they also echoed the classical concern that schools be supported in significant part by the parents of those who attended them.

For example, consider Thomas Cooper, an English radical originally from Manchester and later a close associate of Thomas Jefferson.¹¹ By 1820 he was president of South Carolina College. It was common in the early Republic for college presidents to offer a capstone course on political economy to graduating students. Cooper took on the assignment with relish and generated his *Lectures on the Elements of Political Economy*, a Ricardian text, published in 1826. In that volume Cooper repeated the basic Smithian position on education. Cooper opens clearly: "The first duty of a republic is to provide for the education of its citizens" (p. 264). But then he clarifies his position: "I do not think that the free schools erected by the state, should be so free as to furnish knowledge without cost or price." He goes on, "There is no man so poor in this country that he cannot afford half a day's wages per week for the education of his child. There is not an industrious man in the United States who cannot afford twice that contribution" (p. 268). Like Smith, in the end Cooper suggests that school masters' salaries be derived from a combination of state funds and fees.

It is not surprising that Cooper also endorsed the Lancasterian model, at least for larger cities (p. 266). Lancaster had arrived in the United States in 1818, by which time his system of instruction for the poor had already been introduced into a number of major cities. Most notably, in 1805, DeWitt Clinton of New York had organized the Free School Society (later the Public School Society) along Lancasterian principles with the object of educating the poor (Fitzpatrick 1969). The Lancasterian approach with its use of student monitors promised a low-cost path to basic literacy and arithmetic. Cooper's friend Thomas Jefferson was also an enthusiast.

In the North, classical economists held much the same position. For example, Francis Wayland, president of Brown University after 1827, argued in his free-trade text, *Elements of Political Economy*,¹² "Provision should be made, in every neighborhood, for the education of all children under a certain age." But he went on, "The expenses

¹⁰Surprisingly little has been written by historians of economic thought on the educational ideas of antebellum American economists. Joseph Dorfman, in his massive compendium, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization* (1966), devoted steady, but limited, attention to the topic, within his encyclopedic, but largely non-analytical, framework. The historian Paul Conkin (1980) touches in several places on the topic.

¹¹As Joseph Dorfman suggests, Cooper's life presents a fascinating pastiche of a "great revolutionary period" and places him with Paine among the "adventurous souls of the time." An honorary citizen of the French Republic, and close friend of the chemist Joseph Priestly, in a surprising turn of events, he ended his life as a major intellectual supporter of southern slavery (Dorfman 1966, p. 527).

¹²Although Wayland was a staunch free trader, like many New Englanders, he was a supporter of the Whigs in their opposition to Andrew Jackson. For a discussion of Wayland and his role as a "Christian educator," see Davenport (2008).

of this provision may be borne, partly, by a general fund. This fund should, however, never defray more than a portion of the expense; for no man values, highly, what he gets for nothing" (Wayland 1837, p. 137). A very similar position was advocated by the classic free trader Condé Raguét (Dorfman 1966, p. 696).

In their argument, classical economists echoed the dominant opinion among the upper classes in the 1830s and 1840s. As Joseph Dorfman summarized the situation, "leading citizens" in the North, as in England, encouraged education to socialize the working classes. "But few wanted completely free common-school education to go beyond the charity-school type, modeled on the Lancastrian method. It was still felt, as Condé Raguét and Thomas Cooper argued, that more than this would destroy the incentive of parents to be industrious so as to pay for a better education" (1966, pp. 695–696.)

What seems odd in this mimicry of British models is that America, or at least the American North, was at this very moment launching a campaign to democratize education through the provision of free common schools. While England was to come late to free schools, America came early. Starting in Massachusetts in the 1820s and extending through the next several decades, state after state would abolish charity schools and the so-called rate bills (i.e., partial fees falling directly on parents) in favor of free schools supported by local and state property taxes. Researchers continue a lively debate as to exactly why this was the case.¹³ But, whatever the underlying causes for American precociousness in advancing the common school, American classical economists, with their emphasis on free trade and *laissez-faire*, failed to support or appreciate the common school movement. In this respect, they very much resembled the British classical economists they emulated.

IV. EDUCATION AND THE AMERICAN SYSTEM

While free traders in America eagerly took to the teachings of the British classical school, there was a second clear voice in American political economy. The developing nation's political debates over trade policy generated a number of challenges to the academic defense of free trade. The political economy of protection became the intellectual base of antebellum efforts to build an American System. Common schools had a clear appeal for these nation builders. Not least among these was Henry Carey, the largely self-educated Philadelphia publisher and the country's most prominent advocate of protection.¹⁴ Carey claimed that while the free-trade school "taught that it is an unjust interference with the rights of property to compel the wealthy to contribute to

¹³Possible causes include: the religious imperatives of New England Calvinists, the civic importance of education in a republic, the considerable supply of potential teachers, the high incomes of the new nation (especially in the North), the relatively low levels of inequality, the early move toward universal white male suffrage, high levels of community feeling, social capital and boosterism (especially in the West), and the needs of American industrial employers. For an introduction to this fascinating debate, see Black and Sokoloff (2006). For more detail, see Goldin and Katz (2003); Go and Lindert (2007); and Engerman, Mariscal, and Sokoloff (2009). For a view outside the mainstream, see Bowles and Gintis (1976). For a solid historical treatment, see Kaestle (1983, ch. 8).

¹⁴A good introduction to Carey and his work can be found in Conkin (1980).

the education of the poor, [c]ommon schools and a belief in the duty of protection travel always hand in hand together” (Carey 1853, p. 24).

Perhaps the earliest evidence of this connection is to be found in the work of William Jennison. Jennison, a graduate of Harvard, had been a schoolteacher in Philadelphia. In 1828 he wrote his *Outline of Political Economy*. Joseph Dorfman (1966, p. 584) calls Jennison’s book a “manual for common schools.” Jennison had explicitly written it for use in primary education. Jennison (1828, p. 50) was convinced that the “circumstance in regard to property ... most conducive to national prosperity” was “not an excess in the hands of the few, but the general extension of it among the great mass of the people.” Key to this outcome was a “liberal and efficient system of general education, which shall be supported at the public expense, and which shall afford to the children of both rich and poor, such sources of wisdom and knowledge as shall enable them to perform their respective duties as valuable citizens of the republic.” Jennison mentioned with favor the system followed in New England, contrasting it with those of other states, which were maintained “chiefly by individual subscription, by which the advantages of instruction are much diminished to the people” (Jennison 1828, pp. 34–35).

Willard Phillips, another Harvard graduate, converted to protectionism in the 1820s as New England manufacturing expanded (Dorfman 1966, p. 585). Like Jennison, he became a strong supporter of the common school movement. In his *A Manual of Political Economy with Particular Reference to the Institutions Resources and Conditions of the United States* (1828), he questioned the relevance of Adam Smith’s educational policy for the United States. According to Phillips, Smith argued for public provision of only a very limited education for the poor, with all other education left to parents’ discretion. Phillips thought this “not to be a very liberal view” and “especially uncongenial to the habits of thinking and practice of the United States, where the policy of opening the sources of knowledge and encouraging the facilitating, as far as practicable, the access of all, whether rich or poor, has not only been inculcated and favoured, but practically and habitually acted upon” (Phillips 1828, p. 270).

A similar attack on Smith was presented by Calvin Colton, Yale graduate and ultimately professor in economics at Hartford’s Trinity College. Colton was a major publicist for Clay’s American System and the author in 1848 of *Public Economy for the United States* (see Conklin 1980, pp. 188–199). Colton faulted “Adam Smith and his school” for endorsing a system of political economy in which it “is impossible ... that general education should prevail.... There is no provision for it. It is the bare subsistence only of those who do the labor of society which they have provided for” (Colton 1848, p. 170). In Colton’s view, the result was little better than a slave system.

The American system promised much better. American society “was not devised for the few, but for the many; not for a select and privileged corps, but for the millions. General popular education is the great scheme laid out for this republican empire” (Colton 1848, p. 175). Equality and opportunity were defined by the system of education. “Knowledge is power” (p. 171). The most central feature of “the social structure of this great commonwealth ... is that of equal chances in life to all; that a child shall not be born to ignorance for want of the opportunities to acquire knowledge....” And the key to these opportunities were the common schools. That school system “provided for as the first care of the state ... is the cradle of those chances of which we speak” (p. 175).

For Colton, the common schools and protection together recognized laborers as citizens to be shielded from degradation. Education and protection worked hand in hand to build up the productivity of the worker and the country. Anticipating modern theories of human capital, Colton argued that education “is capital, and capital of the most productive kind” (1848, p. 171). Carey had made much the same point in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1837), where he observed, “Whatever tends to improve the quality of labor, may be styled capital, and in this sense, education may be so denominated.” Carey argued that the “superior productiveness” of New England labor was directly attributable to the region’s common schools. Elsewhere, such schools might be considered a luxury, but in New England they had been recognized as a necessity (1837, p. 298). For Carey and the Whig political economists, education not only benefitted the individual, but also in its public aspects broadly benefitted the community. It did this in two ways. It fitted the average person for full citizenship, and it contributed to an environment in which ideas flowed freely so as to raise productivity and encourage innovation.¹⁵

V. THE VISIONARY POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HORACE MANN

The protectionists and their allies in the Whig Party strongly endorsed the cause of the common school movement. The chief intellectual spokesperson for that movement was Horace Mann. Mann was a Whig in the tradition of John Quincy Adams and sympathetic to the logic of tariff legislation.¹⁶ While not a political economist in any formal sense,¹⁷ Mann took a definite interest in the economics of common schools. In effect, he developed a theory of the appropriate character of a democratic economy and the role of education in sustaining that economy. While progressive in his support of the taxation of private property for financing public education, Mann drew heavily on the traditional economic teachings of New England’s Puritan Calvinist tradition.

Under Mann’s leadership, Massachusetts is generally credited with being the first state to establish and maintain a system of free public schools. Mann’s broad influence also encouraged the development of common schools in New York State and then

¹⁵For Carey, “common schools, cheap school-books, cheap newspapers, and cheap literature” formed the institutional base on which the nation’s high productivity rested. In this respect it is interesting to note that Carey, the protectionist, strongly advocated the free flow of ideas and limited copyright protection, and actively opposed international copyright. See Meardon (2005) for a discussion of this outlook.

¹⁶But Mann’s protectionism had definite limits. Like Adams, Mann was a vocal opponent of slavery. After his extensive work building Massachusetts’s common school system, he was elected as a Whig to the US Congress to complete Adams’s term. Mann broke with Webster over the latter’s efforts to reach compromise with the South, a compromise that included a “promise” of an expanded tariff. Mann wrote that while he “regretted as much as anyone the suffering of our laboring classes,” he was not willing “to barter away liberty and blood and souls for profit” (1851 letter, included in M. Mann 1865, p. 346). Mann eventually ran for governor of Massachusetts as a Free Soiler. The Free Soil national platform supported tariffs only for revenue.

¹⁷Mann had clearly read Adam Smith (e.g., see a letter of 1852, included in M. Mann 1865, p. 362). In his later years, he was the first president of the newly formed Antioch College, where he also served as “professor of Political Economy, Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, Constitutional Law, and Natural Theology.” Like many college presidents of the day, Mann taught a course on moral philosophy to the senior students (Morgan 1938, p. 71; M. Mann 1865).

across the northern and western states. While ultimately successful, these efforts met with considerable political opposition.¹⁸

Although from a farm family with few resources, Horace Mann was able to graduate from Brown and become a practicing attorney. Starting in 1827, he served for a decade in the Massachusetts state legislature, rising to the position of Senate president. Mann was part of a progressive, Unitarian-Whig, Boston culture. He was close friends with the Peabody sisters and a frequent visitor at their home. He eventually married Mary Peabody, who actively supported and contributed to his efforts.¹⁹ Another important influence on Mann was his close friend, George Combe, the Scottish leader of the phrenology movement. Combe was a major proponent of a national system of public schools.

In 1837 Mann became secretary of Massachusetts's first board of education. Despite little background in the field, he took to his new job with energy and enthusiasm. In the process of defending the Massachusetts system of free public schools, Mann generated his theory of the role of education in a democracy. Mann built on the logic of the American System.

According to Mann, free common schools suggest themselves naturally to a republic that promotes equality and requires educated citizens. Such schools counter vice and crime, and build common feeling. In his 1839 report to the board, Mann observed, "It would, indeed, be most lamentable and self-contradictory, if, with all our institutions devised and prepared on the hypothesis of common intelligence and virtue, we should rear a class of children to be set apart, and, as it were, dedicated to ignorance and vice" (Mann 1872, p. 8). In the report for 1843, Mann held up with scorn the shabby record of England with respect to education: "it is the country where, incomparably beyond any other, the greatest and most appalling social contrasts exist; where, in comparison with the intelligence, wealth, and refinement of what are called the higher classes, there is the most ignorance, poverty, and crime among the lower" (Mann 1872, p. 258). The United States must avoid this example and build on its republican institutions. The common schools were the key to this all-important effort.

Throughout the 1840s, Mann drew heavily on his wife's intelligence and insight. Before their marriage, Mary Peabody had supported his work unstintingly. A first-rate teacher in her own right, she wrote for the *Common School Journal*. Their honeymoon had consisted of a European tour of schools and charities, with Mary acting as translator in Germany.²⁰ She ultimately was to author/edit a volume on Mann's life and

¹⁸It also should be noted that the common school movement after Mann's period of influence often drew on an unattractive brand of anti-Catholic, Protestant nativism. Similarly, questions of race complicated the movement in parts of the North as well as in the antebellum South. For an overview of this history, see Ravitch (2001) and Kaestle (1983).

¹⁹Mann's first wife, Charlotte, had died young. After a time, he came into the Peabodys' orbit. The Peabody sisters represented the pinnacle of enlightened, New England, feminine independence. Elizabeth was in many ways the most accomplished, a major force in the development of the Transcendentalist movement. She was Mann's early confidant. Elizabeth also was close friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ultimately, it was her youngest sister, the artist, Sophia, who married Hawthorne.

²⁰Mary Mann's knowledge of Spanish also served the cause. After her husband's death she translated the Argentinian patriot, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's, central work: *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*. Sarmiento was a friend and admirer of Horace Mann. Sarmiento strongly supported public education in Argentina and had himself translated much of Mann's work into Spanish (Hall 1936).

writings (Tharp 1953; Marshall 2005). It is fair to speculate that she contributed substantially to Mann's work, bringing to bear her practical experience as an accomplished teacher in the progressive New England model. Mary Mann, like many women in the antebellum period, was passionately devoted to the spread of the common school movement.

Horace Mann did not so easily win over the support of the Massachusetts legislature. Not all members of that body were convinced by his rhetoric. In 1840–41 Mann faced a direct challenge to his board and the normal schools he had supported. While much of the hostility to Mann came from religious groups eager to merge education more completely with traditional Calvinist religious instruction, much originated in claims of economic extravagance. It was directly in response to these economic claims that Mann set out to demonstrate the benefits of education in worker productivity.²¹ He devoted his now-famous 1841 report to "The Effect of Education Upon the Worldly Fortunes of Men." Acknowledging that this view was not the highest that could be taken—indeed, might be the lowest—nevertheless, he maintained that it was "palpable" and "intelligible to all" (Mann 1872, p. 92). Mann set out then to demonstrate the effects of education on productivity. In a surprisingly modern methodological argument, he asserted that anecdotal evidence should not be trusted. Comparing one farmhand with another would not yield very certain evidence. However, the large manufactories of New England, with their hundreds of workers, were well suited for more serious inference. Mann was proud of the originality of his method. He asserted, "I have novel and striking evidence to prove that education is convertible into houses and lands, as well as into power and virtue" (1872, p. 93).

His approach, while still reportorial, had a scientific flavor. Over a year, he sought out information from businessmen who employed large workforces with the purpose of determining "the difference in the productive ability—where natural capacities have been equal—between the educated and the uneducated; between a man or woman whose mind has been awakened to thought and supplied with the rudiments of knowledge by a good common-school education and one whose faculties have never been developed, or aided in emerging from their original darkness and torpor, by such a privilege" (1872, p. 94).

While many of his correspondents provided largely qualitative judgments, Mann found several more quantitative responses. For example, one successful manufacturer reported that substituting "a better for a poorer educated class of operatives" allowed a 12% to 15% increase in the speed of his machinery. Mann carried out a calculation based on reports of women's wages that put the earnings of the most educated at three times that of the illiterate. He concluded that the high wages of American operatives, reportedly twice as high as those of operatives in England, were the product of the American emphasis on education. Even with these high wages, "our manufacturers, with a small percentage of tariff, successfully compete with English capitalists in many branches of manufacturing business. No explanation can be given of this extraordinary fact, which does not take into the account the difference of education between the operatives in the two countries" (1872, p. 119).

On the basis of the evidence, Mann concluded that primary education raised productivity by about 50%. While obviously somewhat crude, Mann's was probably the

²¹For the historical background to Mann's fifth report, see Vinovskis (1970).

first American attempt to quantify the value of education. The report was a great success at the time. More recently, one modern commentator awarded Mann high marks for attempting “to quantify what had hitherto been mere speculation” (Vinovskis 1970, p. 571).²²

Mann also deserves praise for his appreciation of the role of education as capital. According to Mann, education “has a right, not only to be included in the grand inventory of a nation’s resources, but to be placed at the very head of that inventory.... It has more than the quality of an ordinary mercantile commodity, from which the possessor realizes but a single profit as it passes through his hands; it rather resembles fixed capital, yielding constant and high revenues....” And for Mann, this type of capital is more durable than physical capital, more stable in its value across varying market conditions and more robust with respect to changes in public policy (Mann 1872, pp. 109–110).

While Mann’s approach to universal free education differed from the basic argument of the classical economists in a fundamental way, with respect to Malthusian population concerns, he took a very classical view. Like several of the British economists, including J. S. Mill, Mann saw education as a key to the question of population control. “[I]f men once understood their duty and the means to happiness no man would have more children than he could support, educate and leave in a eligible condition behind him, any more than a judicious farmer would have more stock on his farm than he could support with profit to himself, and with humanity to them” (1850 letter, included in M. Mann 1865, p. 284). That understanding was a chief product of education. Without it, Mann saw countries descending into a Malthusian maelstrom of poverty and degradation. Education supported the working and middle classes. But in its absence, “after the poor, the ignorant, the vicious, have fallen below a certain point of degradation, they become an increasing fund of pauperism and vice,—a pauper-engendering hive, a vital, self-enlarging, reproductive mass of ignorance and crime” (Mann 1872, p. 408).

Government must now shape public policy in light of education’s economic potential,

and although statesmen who assail or defend, who raise up or put down, systems of commercial, manufacturing, or agricultural policy, have seldom or never deigned to look at education as the grand agent for the development or augmentation of national resources, yet it measures the efficacy of every other means of aggrandizement, and is more powerful in the production and gainful employment of the total wealth of a country than all other things mentioned in the books of the political economist. (Mann 1872, p. 110)

The economic case for education was strong and consistent with the moral argument. Both required not random charity for the poor, but a systematic and universal commitment. Pointing to Europe, Mann faulted the English for their unconscionable slowness in moving to the type of universal education already introduced in much of Germany.

²²While praising Mann’s fledgling empiricism, Vinovskis suggests that Mann had generated an “educated guess rather than a scientific calculation.” Specifically, in a thoughtful critique, Vinovskis finds that Mann biased the presentation of the questionnaire, preselected his sample, failed to focus on marginal benefits and costs, and lacked the concept of opportunity costs. Without providing any new evidence, Vinovskis puts forward his own educated guess that Mann had overstated productivity gains by at least a factor of two.

This failure had given rise to the dangerous slums of Manchester. Making an analogy with the case for public control of communicable diseases, Mann quoted the British utilitarian churchman William Paley. In Paley's view, to "send an uneducated child into the world is injurious to the rest of mankind: it is little better than to turn out a mad dog or a wild beast into the streets" (Paley, quoted by Mann 1872, pp. 629–630).

Mann acknowledged that there was a substantial opposition to universal education, but he was sure that the argument against free schools was grounded in "false notions which men entertain *respecting the nature of their right to property*" (Mann 1872, p. 532; italics in the original). In diagnosing these "false notions," Mann proposed a radical theory of property based on traditional Puritan thought. Mann's theory was part of a broader New England theme in the first half of the nineteenth century. A number of clergymen and other writers focused on the problem of the relation between the institution of private property and Calvinist religious principles (Davenport 2008). But Mann's argument, more than any of the others, carried with it profound practical implications.

According to Mann, many with property balk at the levying of taxes for the education of the children of others. But against this supposed absolute, Mann raised a claim for a natural right "of every child that is born into the world to such a degree of education as will enable him, and, as far as possible, will predispose him, to perform all domestic, social, civil, and moral duties." This right was founded "upon the same clear ground of natural law and equity as ... founds a child's right, upon his first coming into the world to distend his lungs with a portion of common air, or to open his eyes to the common light, or to receive shelter, protection and nourishment, which are necessary to the continuance of his bodily existence." Those who deny this right are "wrongdoers. The cry 'Stop thief!' comes from the thief himself" (Mann 1872, p. 535).

While incorporating a range of Enlightenment values, Mann's economics can be seen as the direct product of New England Puritanism. Mann sees the great bulk of wealth as originating in the bounty of God's nature. This wealth is held subject to the claims of future generations. A property holder is "bound not to impair the value of their [future generations'] inheritance either by commission or by omission" (Mann 1872, p. 539). For Mann, the present generation is "only a trustee."²³

In matters of religion, Mann aligned himself with the liberal Calvinists who formed the core of the Unitarian movement in eastern Massachusetts. As a child, he had heard the Consistent Calvinism of the New Light pastor Nathaniel Emmons at the church in Franklin, Massachusetts. Mann rebelled against Emmons's harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving religion, and moved toward Unitarianism. The theological splits in American Calvinist thinking in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are complex. But the basic economic views of the Unitarians and more orthodox Calvinists remained very much the same, drawing on traditional Puritan themes. Thus, in matters of economics, Mann's attitudes toward wealth are easily traced to the economic analysis of orthodox Calvinists.

While encouraging hard work and persistence, the long-standing Puritan position held that individual economic success was a gift from God. Wealth was a temptation and a challenge, not a reward or sign of election. The Puritan "conviction held that money is a social good, not a private possession. Its main purpose is the welfare of

²³On the nature of Mann's approach to morality and his "ethic of relationship," see Frey (2009, pp. 55–56).

everyone in society, not the personal pleasure of the person who happens to have control over it” (Ryken 1986, p. 66; also see Frey 2009, pp. 17–19). Calvinism encouraged hard work and industry, but also insisted on moderation in consumption. Wealth was a matter of stewardship.

It is only a small step from these Calvinist economic ideas to Mann’s three axioms on which he justified general taxation in support of free common schools:

1. Successive generations constitute one great commonwealth.
2. The property of the commonwealth is pledged for the education of all its youth.
3. Successive holders of this property are trustees; embezzlement from children is criminal and mean-spirited.

Admittedly, Mann’s defense of free public education went further than the traditional Puritan position on education. While, in many ways, their world view anticipated the common school movement, as a practical matter, Puritans had assumed education to be the responsibility of parents. Like the classical political economists, they advocated public support only for charity cases.²⁴ Mann, however, was sure that such mixed financing generated an under-investment in education for all. Increasingly, the older system appeared highly undemocratic. Whatever Puritan educational practices in the past, the Puritan understanding of wealth and stewardship was well suited to a broader public school movement. For Mann, supporting free common schools represented the critical requirement placed on those the market economy had favored in one way or another. Free schools were nothing less than a natural right. This was the direction of democracy.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The British utilitarians in and out of government looked to cajoling the working classes into a political alliance that would be led by the middle class. Utilitarian philosophical radicals endorsed the spread of education as an element leading to the greatest good for the greatest number. But they did so in a cautious and often abstract fashion. In the end, utilitarian classical political economy was unwilling to call for free state education.²⁵

American free-trade economists echoed the classical line. These early economists spoke fondly of education, but remained hostile to local schools fully subsidizing their students. Like their British cousins, the free traders asserted that paying for education was a major responsibility, central to character formation. Free schools, like all charity, could serve only to undermine the self-reliance of the citizenry. But a more aggressive democratic claim was being advanced in the American common school movement and

²⁴Mann was somewhat disingenuous in referring to the traditional approach to schooling in Massachusetts as being founded on common school principles. And many orthodox Calvinists originally opposed Mann’s state-supported common schools (Culver 1969).

²⁵Somewhat ironically, while the classical political economists opposed common schools, the most effective free-trade politician, Richard Cobden, was a strong advocate of free schooling and an admirer of Horace Mann. Cobden, like a number of his fellow Manchester manufacturers, had been won over to Mann’s views by Mann’s close friend George Combe (Jones 1986).

its supporters among protectionists. With the intent of realizing the democratic goals of the American System, the movement's leader, Horace Mann, was so bold as to put forward a far more radical theory of property than ever the classical economists would tolerate.

Mann was elected to the House of Representatives in 1848 and became absorbed in the conflict over slavery then raging in the Congress. He had surprisingly little to do with the common school movement after that date. Mann's basic equating of common schools and democracy soon came under attack in unanticipated ways. By 1848 the magnitude of the Roman Catholic immigration to the United States was just becoming apparent. The common school movement after mid-century was complicated by an increasing nativist bias hostile to these immigrants and their religion (Groen 2008).²⁶ Nativist issues with respect to common schools have been identified as an important cause (second perhaps only to slavery) of the break-up of the Whig party (Groen 2008). More broadly, the increasing pace of urbanization raised questions as to the democratic logic of the common school movement. The emerging American city was a far cry from the Puritan communities. And, of course, when public schools spread to the southern states after the Civil War, the democratic content of the common school movement was fatally compromised by the racism of the region's white leadership.

Mann's theory of stewardship had little impact on mainstream American political economy. Yet, like much of that mainstream work, it grew from roots in Puritan economic doctrine, roots to which it held close. Like the best political economy of the period, Mann offered an original and creative effort to break from the British classical tradition and to cope with the realities of the new American economy.

Mann's vision of truly democratic common schools was only imperfectly realized. But his practical advocacy of public taxation for the education of the great mass of American children very much carried the day. This position resonated first through the northern United States as states revoked rate bills in favor of general property taxation, and subsequently took root even in the South. By the late nineteenth century, the Whig program of tariff protection at the national level and publicly financed education at the local level had become a reality.

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²⁶It should be noted in fairness to Mann that he never participated actively in these questions. His major religious adversaries had all been orthodox Calvinists, not Catholics. He approved of a compromise in Lowell, Massachusetts, that allowed predominantly Catholic schools to hire Catholic teachers (M. Mann 1865, p. 262). On the other hand, Mann had commented with disapproval on the efforts by William Seward, governor of New York State in 1840, to direct a portion of public funds to Catholic parochial schools (M. Mann 1865, p. 138).

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