

Correspondence

Where are the Economists?

Dear Sir,

One reader at least would like to congratulate the editors on producing a very interesting journal and on discussing a most important theme. Yet reading Professor Schapiro's introductory piece I was struck by a rather obvious gap – if one can be struck by a gap. Government and opposition, in his view, raises not only political but social problems, and should be the province not only of political scientists but also of sociologists. The latter are accordingly legitimized by being given representation on the editorial board. One major social science is thereby rendered conspicuous by its absence. Where is economics? I concede at once that a case can be made out for its omission, and I will deal with this point in a moment. The interesting fact is that no case was made out. No argument was put because presumably no argument was thought to be necessary. This is in my view a rather striking omission.

In so far as it is a reflection on the narrowly technical preoccupations of some economists, one can only sigh and admit that it is right to ignore them in the present context. Government and opposition has little indeed to do with liquidity preference, indifference curves, input-output techniques, marginal propensities and mathematical growth models. Thus much of economics is indeed irrelevant to the subject matter of the journal. So, however, is much of sociology. Even a good deal of what is taught in government departments at universities has little to do with the matter. I recall hours spent in remembering the functions of urban district councils and even once knew what the case of *Attorney General v. Wilts United Dairies* was all about. These matters tell us little about the nature of political opposition or the circumstances in which it is suppressed or takes subversive or destructive forms.

It is fairly widely believed, however, that there is some connection between economic development and a tendency towards totalitarian and/or dictatorial forms of government, and if such a connection exists it is surely relevant to the theme of the journal. There has been quite a considerable literature on the subject. My own small contribution was published some years ago in German under the title *Ökonomische Aspekte des Totalitarismus*. Among more important thinkers I could cite Alexander Gerschenkron's work, his discussions of the connection between the role of the state in

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development and the emergence of an ideology of industrialization. Gerschenkron criticized my own argument concerning the necessity or otherwise of Stalin, but neither he nor any other historian of Russia could conceivably deny that there was some sort of relationship between state-sponsored attempts to catch up with the West and certain kinds of despotic political behaviour. But it is not a matter merely of correctly interpreting Peter the Great or Stalin. It is a question of understanding the politics of the underdeveloped world. If rapid economic change involves shifts in class relationships, a change in the way of life of many people, the emergence of new political interest groups, a major role for the state in planning social and economic transformations, it may well amount, in the words of Simon Kuznets, to a social revolution. Such conditions are apt to throw up leaders who are imbued with ideological fervour and who appeal to enthusiasm and to a Utopian vision. This scarcely predisposes them to toleration. The strains and stresses which accompany rapid economic change have political effects, surely. So does the erosion of traditional beliefs and customs, an erosion which is an integral part of the development process and which can cause a loss of old loyalties without finding a politically viable alternative. One could go on at considerable length along such lines.

A possible answer to all this might be: yes, but all this has only an indirect effect on the relationship of government and opposition, and can and should be studied in so far as it manifests itself in changing political and social attitudes, these being the province of political scientists and sociologists. This is an arguable point. Only it was not argued.

Yours faithfully
A. Nove

Leonard Schapiro writes:

Of course Professor Nove is right. It is not the case that we undervalue the contribution which the economist can and should make to the problem which engages the attention of our journal. Or, for that matter, the contribution of the lawyer. If we mainly stressed the sociologist and the political scientist (and the sociologist or political scientist applying himself to the past – the historian) it was only because these two are primarily concerned with those problems which illustrate the interaction of the government and opposition processes which are at work in every society. But we are indeed anxious to encourage economists, and others, to contribute to the debate, and this should have been stated in our first issue. If our failure to do so should happily have the effect of stimulating economists like Professor Nove, who have interesting things to say on the interaction of economic forces and the political process, to contribute to the journal, we (and we hope our readers) will feel justified, malgré nous.