

Ranson, Baldwin (1986). "A Personal Appreciation."  
*Review of Institutional Thought*. December.

John Fagg Foster died at his home in Englewood, Colorado, on July 15, 1985. He was 77.

Foster had retired from the University of Denver in 1976 after professing economics there for thirty years. During his career he had a profound influence within the field of economics and beyond.

Within the field of economics his influence was twofold. He influenced the thinking of many students who became economists; some of whom were identified in James Sturgeon's history of the Association for Institutional Thought in the first issue of this journal. And he proposed a theory of institutional adjustment that may yet be recognized as the intellectual tool vital to the reconstruction of economics sought by many institutional economists.

Foster chose to practice economics because he saw it as potentially the most comprehensive and coherent field in the social sciences. He defined economics not as the study of market proxies for psychic phenomena but as the study of all activities through which human groups provide themselves with the means of life and experience. Thus defined, the field forces economists to distinguish universals in the provisioning process from culture-bound constructs masquerading as continuing factors. It leads to analysis of the continuity of technological progress and the discontinuity of institutions, those prescribed patterns of behavior that facilitate or obstruct the application of technology.

Foster's long study of technology and institutions and of the valuations necessary to direct them to human betterment led him to formulate three principles of institutional adjustment which, in fact, constitute a reconstruction of economic analysis. The record of this intellectual achievement may be found in his papers, published in the December 1981 issue of the *Journal of Economic Issues*, and in his course notes available from the secretary-treasurer of AFIT.

Foster's influence beyond economics is nowhere recorded, but lives in the memories his students have of a rare person of great intellect and integrity. Two examples will provide a pale reflection of the memories this student has of his teacher's intellectual competence and human completeness.

Foster's ability to subject the whole of human experience to analysis and comprehension is reflected in his careful definitions of terms usually left hopelessly vague by others. Each definition sought to relate a word to the observable continuum of human experience. Love he defined as "the integration of two personalities;" freedom as "the area of discretion;" responsibility as "accountability for one's behavior;" value as "the criterion of judgment;" and capitalism as "the system based on the invidious notion that the capacity to pay is a valid index of 'relative worth' of individuals, and should therefore be the criterion in terms of which permission is granted or denied to participate in the determination of economic and social policy."

With key words clearly defined, Foster was able to apply his original analytical tools to any social issue. The following unpublished fragment shows how he took the occasion of an attack on the lecture method to develop an insightful analysis of the function of a teacher.

The lecture method has been accused of all the badness of bad lectures. This kind of imputation is usually accomplished through the assumption that the imperfections of a bad lecture are inherent in the method. One might draw a near parallel by saying that the use of a hammer to crush the skull of a neighbor invalidates hammers as instruments for building houses. It is true, you see, that if the hammer were made in such fashion that it could be used only for homicide (a pointed face, etc.), it becomes only a lethal weapon, and some lectures give that impression. But in that case it is taking a liberty with language to call it a hammer. To do so is simply camouflage.

It is true that a lecture which is simply a preconceived sequence of words, based on the notion that a certain sequence of words is its constitution, is better presented in written form. A lecture which is read has no value beyond the added amusement of drama. Paper and ink are less expensive than some lecturers. But a lecture which is based on the notion that a sequence of ideas is the content, and which involves access to any pattern of repetition or emphasis—vocal, physical, or visual—to respond to evidenced reactions of students, is a very different matter.

Since paper and ink are less expensive than some teachers, a teacher who has nothing to suggest beyond the literature and who has insufficient capacity to analyze student response as he proceeds had better do something else. And the attack on the lecture method, I suspect, comes mostly from those teachers who have nothing to contribute in content, qualitatively or quantitatively, except the words in the books. They simply are bad lecturers, and before that they are bad scholars. They are much nearer policemen.

Where a body of organized analysis is to be considered, a batting around by several who are admittedly unaware of the structure and content of the analysis is the least efficient method possible of getting the analysis into common view. The efficient use of multilateral discussion is in sharpening and correcting comprehension after a structure is in view of all participants.

Presumably the university teacher has something to contribute—something beyond the previous experience of the students and beyond what is available in less expensive or less adequate form. But if he hasn't, he can resort to the "discussion method," and his inadequacies may never be found out, even by the bright students. Many a "seminar" at the undergraduate level has served well as a camouflage of the teacher's failure to perform his function. But if he has something to say which requires more than the written word, and he says it, then he has delivered a lecture. And what is bad about that?

The lecture method does not lend itself so readily to camouflage for the charlatan or for the inept. The good lecture: 1) requires a great deal of work, though skill varies on this axis; 2) appears "easy;" 3) requires more than phonographic functions (even the most elaborate electronic devices cannot judge student responses); 4) involves more real participation by more students than any other method; 5) is not a one-way activity; 6) requires great ingenuity and celerity. In fact, it requires so much that I

dare not use it except where it and I clearly fit the circumstances.

Only time will reveal whether accumulating evidence will bring general acceptance of Foster's analytical tools, the principles of institutional adjustment. But for those of us who had the honor to know Fagg Foster, his passing is a current reminder that the significance of life lies in contributing to the developmental forces of life. His life of integrity and intelligence provides an inspiring example for us all of what Lewis Mumford defined as value:

... value comes into existence through man's primordial need to distinguish between life-maintaining and life-destroying processes, and to distribute his interests and energies accordingly.

Fagg Foster knew how to make this distinction, and he distributed his energies accordingly to the end.

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