

Economics textbook legacy of the classical political economists: mythologization or re-presentation?

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The understanding of classical political economists (CPE) is highly contested. According to Schumacher (2012) the way how mainstream economic textbooks refer to their theories and concepts has a mystifying character. Representations perpetuate through time and the selective interpretations establish an often reduced or primitive account of key CPE concepts and theories. Whereas Marx' contributions are widely rejected by mainstream economists, the treatment of Ricardo and Smith by mainstream discourse is more ambiguous to the extent that it still encompasses and builds on concepts and ideas of them. The decision to focus particularly on Smith and Ricardo is motivated by the objective to disentangle the ambiguities and frictions that characterise mainstream economists' relationship with these two thinkers. The “pick and chose” culture when it comes to CPE and its contributions, in our perspective, represents a definite weakness of contemporary economics as it lacks academic rigor as well as authenticity. In our contribution we are going to unravel these shortcomings and deliver an understanding of Smith and Ricardo that is based on their original writings and a common denominator in their lines of thought, namely the labor theory of value (LTV).

Neoclassical Economics as we know it today has its origins in the Marginalist Revolution starting from the 1870s. Dominated by figures such as Alfred Marshall, Carl Menger or Leon Walras it has to be contextualized as an academic revolution, whose main objective was to challenge the CPE understanding of the LTV and its class based analysis of the economy. This subsequent stream of thought became known as orthodox or mainstream economics, which ultimately builds on the concepts of marginal utility and rationality that are used to undermine and replace LTV interpretations of the economy. Still, mainstream economics incorporates and builds on certain elements and concepts stemming from the classical tradition. The isolated treatment and identification of certain concepts with classical thinkers, however, distorts from the original labor value theoretical basis and simply adapts concepts such as the invisible hand or comparative advantage to fit into the contemporary neoclassical narrative.

The purpose of this paper is thus to systematically analyse and reveal how and which CPE concepts and theories have become incorporated into the mainstream narrative and how this differs from a theoretical interpretation that is more closely in line with the original writings. Our primary focus will be to show how information and knowledge is created and distributed within the teachings of the discipline by analysing the most prominent and widely used introductory economics textbooks (according to: The Econocracy, 2017; Egerer/Rebhan, 2018). As a first analytical step in terms of our methodology we will rely on qualitative content analysis based on Mayring. Grounding our research on the analysis of economics textbooks we will generate categories based on which we aim to generate a typology of CPE. Thereby we aim at establishing an interpretation that is more conducive and closer to the original writings of Smith and Ricardo's contributions, which acknowledges their historic and social context.

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