



A Rigged Test: A Critical Look at Buturovic and Klein’s Conception of “Economic Enlightenment”

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ABSTRACT

My first reaction to Zeljka Buturovic and Daniel B. Klein’s “Economic Enlightenment in Relation to College-going, Ideology, and Other Variables: A Zogby Survey of Americans” (2010) was, as I wrote on my blog (Ruccio 2010), that the test was rigged. After exchanging views on-line with Klein, and rereading the article, I stand behind my original reaction: the authors’ study is based on a methodology—a particular set of statements and responses, along with a conception of “economic enlightenment”—that was biased from the start.²

My principal critique of the study is that it is based on a set of statements for which the authors state the incorrect, which they interpret as “unenlightened,” responses. The statements themselves are the sort one will find in any mainstream, neoclassical textbook of introductory economics.³ Here are the eight statements (and, according to the authors, the “unenlightened” responses) used in the study:

1. Restrictions on housing development make housing less affordable.
 - Unenlightened: Disagree

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Acknowledgment: I want to thank Kevin Rollins and Daniel B. Klein for inviting me to submit a comment.

2. My exchange (Ruccio 2010) with Klein can be found here (accessed: 27 July 2010): [Link](#)

3. I teach from such a book on a regular basis: *Microeconomics*, by Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus (2009). Just as I was composing this response, my desk copy of Samuelson and Nordhaus arrived for my Principles of Microeconomics course this fall.

2. Mandatory licensing of professional services increases the prices of those services.
 - Unenlightened: Disagree
3. Overall, the standard of living is higher today than it was 30 years ago.
 - Unenlightened: Disagree
4. Rent control leads to housing shortages.
 - Unenlightened: Disagree
5. A company with the largest market share is a monopoly.
 - Unenlightened: Agree
6. Third-world workers working for American companies overseas are being exploited.
 - Unenlightened: Agree
7. Free trade leads to unemployment.
 - Unenlightened: Agree
8. Minimum wage laws raise unemployment.
 - Unenlightened: Disagree

The problem of this and all such tests of correct and incorrect economic reasoning (such as the pre-testing and post-testing utilized by the mainstream economics education movement) is that the statements and correct responses are rigged. They represent the view of neoclassical economists, and respondents are considered unenlightened if they don't give the correct, neoclassical answers.

One can easily imagine a different set of policy-oriented questions and answers. For example, a different survey might include statements like "The reserve army of labor keeps wages low" or "Exploitation occurs even when workers are paid a living wage." Similarly, the statements chosen by Buturovic and Klein might have different "enlightened" or "unenlightened" responses. Take number 6: from a Marxian perspective, Third World workers are being exploited, as are First World workers—as are, for that matter, all productive workers in capitalist enterprises. Therefore, a specifically "Marxian enlightened" answer would be "agree."

But that's not my main point, since I don't want to defend either what the authors of the study consider to be the correct answers, or the "incorrect" answers given by many of the respondents. My point, rather, is that there are different economic representations—among academic economists and everyday economists, inside academic economics as well as academic disciplines other than economics and outside the academy. They literally use different economic discourses, through which they view such issues as rent control and minimum wages, and of course come up with different answers.

This is an area I explore in *Economic Representations* (Ruccio 2008) as well as (with my coauthor, Jack Amariglio) in “Academic and Everyday Economic Knowledges” (chapter 7 of Ruccio and Amariglio 2003). Our general point is that a particular group of academic economists—call them neoclassical or neoliberal or classical liberal—do not hold a monopoly on the production and dissemination of economic knowledges. Economic issues and themes are thought about and discussed by many people other than academic neoclassical economists—within the discipline of economics, elsewhere in the academy, and throughout society. The groups include, inside the discipline of economics, economists who utilize a wide variety of non-neoclassical perspectives, from Keynesian and institutionalist to feminist and Marxian theories. Inside the academy, but outside the discipline of economics, scholars “do economics” in disciplines as diverse as cultural studies, literary theory, anthropology, geography, and political science. And outside the academy, economics is practiced by a wide variety of nonacademic writers and activists, including people who work in think tanks, human rights organizations, trade unions, and so on. All of these economists, whether or not they actually have a doctorate (or, for that matter, any academic training) in economics, produce knowledges about and participate in debates concerning economic concepts, issues, and policies.

These academic and everyday economists often—but certainly not always—arrive at conclusions that differ from those of neoclassical economists. To dismiss those conclusions as “unenlightened,” as do Buturovic and Klein, is to invoke a troubling position of scientific authority and of the disciplinary self. It means that one set of responses—those of the neoclassical academic economist—are considered to be the enlightened, correct ones and everything else is, well, incorrect and unenlightened.

In fact, the authors immediately move on to analyze correlations with various identifiers (such as level of education and ideology) without making any attempt to justify their designation of responses as enlightened or unenlightened. They presume, from within their own economic theory, what the correct and incorrect responses are, thereby invoking a singular notion of economic science and a privileged notion of the disciplinary self. They (and those who agree with them) are declared enlightened, and anyone who gives a different response is not.

An interesting question to ask of such surveys is, what are the discursive protocols that lead to such different responses to particular statements about economic policies? Attempting to answer that question would mean investigating not only the different entry points and methodologies of the theories people use to respond to such statements but also the different interests of the people who contribute their responses. In other words, instead of presuming that economic science is singular, and that economic scientists have no interests (aside from

objectivity), it is possible to start from the position that economic theories are always plural—there are different, incommensurable economic theories that people use to make sense of the economic dimensions of their lives and of the society in which they live—and that interests matter when it comes to responding to statements—in the sense that responses depend on a whole range of social identities, including whether or not one represents and performs the hegemonic theory within the discipline of economics.

As it turns out, Buturovic and Klein betray their interests in the final section of the paper. First, they call for more economics education, seemingly guided by the idea that the problem consists of economic illiteracy, and that “more emphasis on economics instruction” would give people more economic enlightenment. Their outlook appears to be that people are either a blank slate (on which correct economic knowledge can be written) or are misguided by an “ersatz” economics (which needs to be destroyed, after which correct economic knowledge can be instilled). Second, and even more important, they express their concern with the “kind of economics instruction” students receive, and advise parents and students to avoid economics courses that are “hostile to classical liberal thinking.”

This is the most troubling dimension, which calls into question the entire study. Buturovic and Klein already know what an enlightened economics is—that which instills “classical liberal thinking”—and everything else contributes to unenlightenment. Economics education, for them, is not for teaching critical thinking about economic issues, exposing students to a variety of theories, or examining the changing vicissitudes of theories and methods across the history of economic thought. No, it’s to instill what they consider to be the correct ideas, the “enlightened” responses to contemporary policy questions.

This is indoctrination, which in a capitalist democracy is not a particularly enlightened position.

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