Controlling the “Commanding Heights” of Political Science Education: A Survey of Political Economy Courses from an Author-Based Perspective

A n essential aspect of any good undergraduate education involves introducing students to a wide array of intellectual models and theories. We often refer to this concept as allowing students to enter “the marketplace of ideas.” It is the belief that a quality education requires that students be introduced to all types of competing intellectual movements. A good political science education would expose students to many epistemological approaches. In the field of political science, for example, there exists quality work arguing for the importance of historical and path-dependence models (Peters, 2001; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Koellble, 1995), the role of institutions and the “rules of the game” (Clayton & Gillman, 1999; Riker, 1962, 1982; Shepsle, 1979), rational-choice models (Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965, 1982; Mueller, 1989), psychological approaches (Dawes, 1988), and many more. If students of political science are to engage in debates that are important to our field, they need to be versed in a variety of scholarly theories.

In order for students to be taught in an atmosphere of intellectual pluralism, instructors have a responsibility to (1) offer a wide array of reading materials that reflect the numerous approaches to the field and (2) stay current with new and developing theories and models. It is likely that the nationwide community of political science instructors offers a wide spectrum of readings, theories, and
methodological approaches when it comes to meeting these two goals. Most larger universities have a combination of young new professors teaching the latest theories, mixed with long-time tenured professors who teach both classic theories and new emerging theories, and unfortunately, probably one professor who is still teaching the same syllabus developed in the 1960s: a syllabus focused on the behavioral revolution and the emergence of structural functionalism.

The seismic political and economic changes that swept the globe in the early 1990s provide a unique opportunity to reflect on how political science departments teach political economy and whether those departments have been influenced by external events. During the long decades of the Cold War, the world was split into two general camps in terms of economic organization. Running the risk of oversimplifying, there were those nations that believed markets were the best way to provide citizens with economic stability and a comfortable standard of living, and on the other side, there were countries that felt governments with extensive command and control mechanisms could best provide for their citizens. Of course, there was variation within the stark dichotomy. Market-based societies ran the gamut from the United States’ predominant use of markets with an extensive bureaucracy to more purely market-based economies such as Hong Kong. For countries that adopted the more command-and-control approach, there was also variation. Germany and much of Europe and India adopted extensive state-based planning systems, but not to the same extent as Eastern Europe and the Soviet-dominated nations.

The elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and emergence of free trade-based globalization changed the ratio of the world’s market and state based economies. Starting in the early 1990s, markets made a comeback. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw (2002) describe the trend:

All around the globe, socialists are embracing capitalism, governments are selling off companies they had previously nationalized, and countries are seeking to entice back multi-
national corporations that they had expelled just two decades earlier. Marxism and state control are being jettisoned in favor of entrepreneurship; the number of stock markets is exploding; mutual fund managers have become celebrities. Today, politicians on the left admit that their governments can no longer afford the expansive welfare state, and American liberals recognize that more government may not hold the solutions to every problem. (x)

The Heritage Foundation’s 2005 *Index of Economic Freedom* lends support to Yergin and Stanislaw’s assertion. According to the *Index*, of the 155 countries numerically scored, eighty-six countries have become more economically free since the previous year’s *Index* was recorded, whereas only fifty-seven countries have become less free. A more long-term perspective leads to the same conclusion. The report notes, “Over the past nine years of the *Index*, there has been a definite trend toward freedom. Both the average score and the median score have improved by 0.17 points since the 1997 *Index* and are now almost sufficient to merit the classification of ‘mostly free.’” Figure 1 provides a visual representation of their findings.
Again, Yergin and Stanislaw conclude

by the 1990s, it was government that was retreating. Communism had not only failed, it had all but disappeared in what had been the Soviet Union and, at least as an economic system, had been put aside in China. In the West, governments were shedding control and responsibilities. Instead of “market failure,” the focus was now on “government failure”—the inherent difficulties that arise when the state becomes too expansive and too ambitious . . . in the economy. (xiii)

Despite the trend, those who support state-regulated economies, redistributive policies, and collective ownership of capital have not rolled over in the wake of spreading market philosophies. Many pundits have argued that the recent rejection of the European Union Constitution by France and the Netherlands resulted from a fear that the new economic rules of the EU would dismantle domestic social welfare policies. As recently as 1998, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder slowly tried to free up capital and labor markets and scale back Germany’s social welfare state. However, he ran into intense political opposition, and his popularity ratings fell considerably as a result.

Clearly, then, despite the almost deterministic optimism of Yergin and Stanislaw, the debate concerning the efficacy of markets is far from over. Students who emerge from undergraduate institutions will be required to engage in these debates whether it is as policy makers or as citizens. In order to make informed decisions, they will need a solid background in the strengths and weaknesses of both market and non-market economies. A large part of this education rests upon a firm understanding of the classical theories on which the debate between market and command economies is based.

The purpose of this article is to examine whether undergraduate political science departments are fulfilling their obligation to provide opportunities for students to engage in all facets of the market versus non-market debates that are a significant focus of politi-
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cal economy education. Simply put, are we teaching, with openness to all sides of the debate, the classics that frame the contest about the nature of economic systems? Do our students read Karl Marx or Friedrich Hayek? Are they reading both in equal quantities or one more than the other? Are students introduced to multiple economic theories in the same class? Or do they need to take multiple classes to enjoy intellectual pluralism?

It is important that academics understand the nature of their curriculum. In order to develop critical thinking skills, to be prepared as citizens to vote on critical issues such as NAFTA, the WTO, and CAFTA, and to make informed political decisions about domestic fiscal policy, students need to be introduced to a variety of theoretical constructs. If social science departments are teaching only a narrow spectrum of these debates, academia is doing a disservice to both students and civic education.

As more nations embrace market-based organizational systems, there will continue to be normative and empirical debates about the wisdom of such policies. Peer-reviewed journals will be full of those debates. But regardless of the prevailing opinion about the wisdom of such policies, students need to understand the impact such policy adoption will have. Some suggest that students are not being properly introduced to market-based concepts. Professor George W. Carey of Georgetown University writes in the introduction to his *Contemporary American Conservative Thought* syllabus,

I initiated this course about ten years ago at the undergraduate level because I felt a significant and important body of thought was being neglected not only by our Government Department, but other departments in the University as well. To put this otherwise, a liberal view of the world seemed to prevail in the culture. This outlook (some would say ideology), virtually unchallenged in the groves of academe, embraced any number of -isms e.g., scientism, egalitarianism, secular humanism, progressivism. My intention was simply to introduce students to serious thinkers who had come to reject this liberalism, as well as to the writings of those who saw seri-
ous problems resulting from the application its principles. In this process, students will read works that are considered by many to be modern classics, e.g. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*; Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*; Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*. All of the assigned works raise questions that thoughtful individuals should ponder.

Obviously, Professor Carey is concerned that students may not always have the opportunity to benefit from intellectual pluralism. Additionally, there may be some ideological tensions simmering below the surface which may be natural for a conservative working in a predominantly liberal field. From the outset, however, it should be made clear that this article is not an attempt to enter into the current debates about the ideological leanings of collegiate faculty. It confines itself to the simple questions: what are we teaching our students in the field of political economy, and are those teachings adequately preparing them for a world that is continually moving towards more market-based economic systems? My findings suggest that academics, particularly political scientists, teach theories of political economy in isolation. Students get a singular perspective depending on the instructor. Intellectual pluralism exists within departments, but not within particular classes. Unless students take multiple political economy classes (which is unlikely), they will most likely end up with a one-sided education.

**Data and Methods**

Data for this study were collected by examining syllabi from political economy classes. Syllabi reveal a wealth of information about the general nature of political science curriculum. They reveal what books and articles are assigned, what topics are covered (and ignored), and how much time is spent on each issue. A syllabus can also reveal what instructors feel is important.

The dataset was compiled by collecting the syllabi of political economy classes offered by political science departments at the top thirty American universities as identified in the 2005 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. The collection of syllabi was limited to the
two years prior to the summer of 2005 for a total of four semesters or six quarters. Summer session syllabi were excluded from the dataset.

Determining what constituted a “political economy” class for the purposes of this study took some effort. Some classes were clearly identified by titles such as “Introduction to Political Economy” or “Political Economics.” However, also included in the dataset were classes that were clearly political economy classes without that specific title, such as “Politics and Economic Policy,” “Politics and Capitalism,” “Government and Business,” and “Politics and Markets.” For the purpose of theoretical cohesiveness, international political economy (IPE) classes were not included. Neither were specialty political economy classes such as “The Political Economy of Non-Profit Organizations” or “The Political Economy of Gender.” Also excluded were classes that were crosslisted from other departments. For example, some political science departments give credit for classes offered in the economics department. However, including these classes, which were not common to all college or university political science departments, inordinately weighted the impact of some departments, and, finally, classes taught more than once in the two-year time span were counted only once and the class had to be actually taught, not simply listed as a “potential course.”

In all, seventy-seven classes were identified that met the above criteria. From those seventy-seven classes, fifty-eight syllabi were collected. The missing nineteen syllabi could not be collected for a variety of reasons: the professor had changed jobs, retired, died, or was simply unwilling to submit his syllabus. Assuming that the professors who were unable or unwilling to submit syllabi are normally distributed in terms of their text offerings, the missing data should not have any biasing effects on the overall sample.

Each syllabus was examined for the presence of the following authors: Karl Marx, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Adam Smith. These four authors were selected for the study in order to provide a fair balance of market and non-market theorists. At first glance, it may appear that there exists a selection bias towards market theorists (three market theorists and only one non-market theorist).
However, Marx clearly stands out in the field of political economy as the preeminent non-market theorist. None of the other three theorists can claim an equal standing as the preeminent market theorist. Thus, a one-on-one comparison of Marx versus any of the three market theorists would be an unfair comparison. For example, one could examine a syllabus that assigned readings by Marx and extensive readings by Friedman. But, if the study were only comparing Marx and Hayek, the study would incorrectly conclude that students were not being exposed to market theorists. Therefore, this study compared the number of times Marx was assigned to how often any one of three classic market theorists was assigned.

In order to be counted, the syllabi had to assign the author in the original, primary text, not through a secondary source. The examination of syllabi revealed that many classes use secondary textbooks which tangentially address or summarize the theories of Marx, Hayek, Friedman, and Smith. For the purposes of this study, however, only the assignment of primary source texts by such authors was registered. This filtering was done for a variety of reasons. First, to examine every required text and peer-review journal paper from fifty-eight classes would have required the purchase and perusal of over 300 texts and hundreds of articles. Second, this study seeks to understand if instructors are emphasizing the classic texts that outline the debates over market capitalism. It seems reasonable that instructors truly committed to educating students on these topics will assign the original texts, not offer a chapter subsection that briefly reviews their work.

Syllabi were then coded for either the presence or non-presence of the author. The number of times an author appeared on one syllabus was not counted. For example, a syllabus that assigned three separate works by Marx was coded the same (1) as a syllabus that required students to read only one work of Marx. This was done to prevent one class from improperly weighting the sample. For example, one syllabus in the dataset required the reading of nine articles by Hayek, raising the possibility that the examination of ten syllabi in which eight syllabi required Marx and one required Hayek (but required him nine times) would indicate, incorrectly,
that Hayek was assigned more often than Marx. The simple dummy coding approach eliminates this potential problem.

Finally, it is not the intention of this article to praise, criticize, or single out any particular institution or instructor. Therefore, throughout the article classes are identified by title only.

Findings and Discussion
Before examining the findings, it is important to note that we rarely teach classes completely focused on political economy. On average, each university in the dataset offers about thirty classes per semester or seventy classes per year. With thirty universities spanning two academic years, the approximate total number of classes offered was 4,200, of which only seventy-seven classes (two percent) were dedicated to political economy. Of course, when international political economy and regional political economy classes are included, the number more than doubles but still represents a small portion of the total classes offered. Classes focused on American political economy are even rarer. Of the seventy-seven classes identified, only two classes were titled “American Political Economy.”

One possible explanation for the dearth of political economy classes may be found in the structure of most political science departments. Political science departments typically organize themselves into five general sub-disciplines: American Government, Comparative Government, International Relations, Political Theory, and sometimes Research Methods. Political economy does not fit comfortably in any of these sub-disciplines. Political economy is a subject that is relevant to all fields, and an understanding of political economy helps one understand each subfield better, but it does not wholly fit into one particular area. American government instructors are focused on teaching institutions, parties, interest groups, media, and the law. Political economy might make up a section of an introduction class but not merit an entire class. In comparative government and international relations, IPE classes seem more appropriate, and political economy is completely off the radar for instructors and methods. As a result, political economy may be the neglected stepchild of political science.
When we do teach political economy, Marx remains the dominant theorist. Figure 2 reports the distribution of the four authors. Figure 2 reveals that, by a nearly 3:1 margin, Marx is the most popular author among political economy instructors. Twenty-three syllabi required that students read Marx in his original text. Comparatively, only eight syllabi required students to read either Hayek or Friedman in their original text. And only seven classes require the reading of Smith.

Figure 3 reports the same data but from a different perspective. If Hayek, Friedman, and Smith are lumped together, it becomes clear that market theorists, as a whole, are assigned as frequently as is Karl Marx. In fact, by coincidence, pooling the market theorists shows that market theorists and Marx were both assigned twenty-three times.4
At this point, the question of whether students are adequately introduced to both market and non-market ideas runs into classic problems that surround how social scientists present data. Obviously, the data show a preference for Marx. However, the data can be aggregated to show a more equal distribution of market and non-market authors. Which representation is most accurate and fair?

Regardless of how the aggregate data is presented, a more illuminating way to examine the data is to see how often market and non-market theorists are taught together in the same class. Assuming it is unlikely that students will take multiple political economy classes, we need to test whether students are being introduced to the marketplace of ideas within a single class.

Figure 4 reveals that it is more common for instructors to teach theorists in isolation rather than juxtaposing them with other theorists. The data show that about one third of the time that Smith, Hayek, and Friedman are taught, they are taught without students being required to read Marx. Similarly, Figure 4 shows that of the twenty-three times Marx was assigned, in seventeen cases students were not directly introduced to the works of Smith, Hayek, or Friedman. In only three instances were students required to read
all four authors together. The initial findings suggest students are not introduced to the marketplace of ideas within a single class.

A more accurate indicator of a “balanced class,” however, would be to measure how often a student is required to read Marx and any other market theorist. Figure 4 reveals that six classes required students to read Marx and either Smith, Hayek, or Friedman, suggesting that only ten percent of political economy classes do a good job of introducing students to “the marketplace of ideas.” And finally, Figure 4 also reveals that twenty of the seventy-seven syllabi (twenty-six percent) do not require the reading of any of the classic theorists in their original text.5

What is clear is that instructors are more likely to assign Marx than other political economists. A variety of explanations for such behavior exist, some of which have more validity than others.

It could be argued that Marx is assigned more often than Smith, Hayek, and Friedman because Marx was more than simply an econ-
omist. He was an economist, political theorist, and sociologist all at once. His theories were some of the first to challenge the predominance of market thought. Hayek and Friedman in contrast could be viewed as simply rearguing older classical economics in a new era. They were challenging Marx’s challenge of Smith, but not necessarily offering a new construct for organizing labor and capital.

The limitations of this argument, however, are twofold. If such a rationale is correct, then shouldn’t we expect to see Smith assigned more? If the debate between market and non-market economies can be represented by Smith and Marx, then why is Marx assigned three times as often as Smith? Second, it might be unfair to label Smith, Hayek, and Friedman as “just economists.” All three authors contributed as much to the field of political science, especially political economy, as they did to economics. Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* and Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* are significant contributions that offer more insight into political science than economics. Consequently, the argument that Marx is assigned more often than other market theorists because he has roots in more academic disciplines seems untenable.

It is also possible that professors are influenced by the political events that shaped their own education. Professors who were formed by World War II typically have a different political worldview from professors who were graduate students in the late 1960s. The teaching of political economy may suffer a similar bias. The emergence of market-based economies is a relatively new phenomenon. Only professors who were graduate students in the last decade and a half experienced the market movement while they were shaping their intellectual identities. If one considers that major texts and lauded peer-review articles suffer a three- to four-year lag between event and publication, the number of professors who, as graduate students, truly engaged in the academic debates surrounding emerging market economies is an even smaller group.

Prior to the emergence of market-based economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s, most graduate students studied Jawaharlal Nehru’s India, Gamal Nasser’s Egypt, and Salvador Allende’s Chile. These nations, like almost all developing nations during the 1960s and
1970s were following a state-based economic development model. Those focusing attention on the United States had the New Deal and Great Society as case studies. Naturally, one can expect that as these graduate students became professors, their class syllabi were influenced by the historical events that shaped their education.

In the end, as Occam's Razor suggests, the simplest answer might be the most realistic answer. It is possible that Marx is assigned more often than Hayek, Friedman and Smith because Marx is more in line with the values of the instructors who assign the readings. The 1999 North American Academic Study Survey (NAASS) reports that seventy-two percent of college faculty members identify themselves as “left/liberal” compared to only fifteen percent who identify themselves as “right/conservative.” In political science, the percentage of faculty who self-identify as “left/liberal” is eighty percent. And instructors are human. They like to assign to their students authors they themselves enjoy, agree with, and find supportive of their worldview. It is very unlikely that Hayek and Friedman are the most popular theorists in a field that is predominantly left-of-center. Hayek and Friedman appeal to those few instructors who have more libertarian affinities whereas Marx naturally appeals to those who favor state intervention in economic affairs, e.g., “left/liberal.”

The NAASS shows that collegiate professors do, in fact, support significant state involvement in the economy. When confronted with the statement, “Government should guarantee employment,” sixty-six percent of faculty strongly or somewhat agreed. Only thirty-four percent strongly or somewhat disagreed. To the statement, “Government should reduce income gap,” seventy-two percent strongly or somewhat agreed and only twenty-nine percent somewhat or strongly disagreed. Hayek, Friedman, and Smith, in contrast, all advocate minimal government involvement in the economy. Given the normative dissonance between most faculty and market theorists, it is not surprising that these authors are rarely assigned.

**Conclusion**

E. E. Schattschneider once famously said of the pluralist model, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the choir sings with a
strong upper class accent.” If the assignment of classic texts is an indirect indicator of who “sings” in the political economy choir, the Marxist section seems to be a little larger than the other sections. The voices of Hayek, Friedman, and Smith can be heard, but the only way to compete with the volume of Marx is to pool their voices together.

The data also suggest a two-part conclusion. At the individual class level, we rarely offer classes that introduce students to more than one theoretical approach. Instructors who like Friedman teach Friedman. Instructors who like Marx teach Marx. But, the political science field as a whole, with all of its class offerings, provides ample opportunity for students to encounter both market and non-market theorists equally. This seemingly paradoxical conclusion stems from the likelihood that while as individual instructors we have biases, there exists such a wide array of biases that from a class-offering perspective, they balance each other out. Not unlike Madison’s view of factions, there appears to be many factions within the sub-discipline of political economy; but there are enough widely diverse factions to provide students a healthy “marketplace of ideas” if they choose to take multiple classes from instructors with unique perspectives.

The data suggest not an indictment of political economy pedagogy, but a warning shot across the bow to all who teach it (and other sub-disciplines of political science). Instructors must be eternally vigilant against any self-selection bias when it comes to text assignment. Simply put, we must be willing to assign authors with whom we may personally and intellectually disagree. Students entering into a field of study for the first time deserve to examine all legitimate and peer-reviewed arguments, even if a preponderance of the faculty has a preference for one vein of that study. Only then can we expect our graduates to be able to rigorously defend and criticize both market and non-market policy proposals they may encounter as professionals or citizens.

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Of course, while syllabi are obvious indicators of what a professor is teaching in a given course, what they don’t tell us is what the professor says about those readings. Unfortunately, ascertaining that information is impractical for the purposes of this article.


Numbers do not total fifty-eight because some classes did not require the reading of any of the authors identified in this article.

The numbers do not equal fifty-eight because some classes required students to read of more than one theorist.

**Bibliography**