



Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

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Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet and may require registration or subscription to access if they are. Some of the original articles are syndicated and therefore may have appeared in other publications also.

10 July 2011

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

Dear Editor:

Education guru Diane Ravitch and seven letter-writers combine today to compose 1,800 words on the parlous state of K-12 education ("Sunday Dialogue: What to Do to Make Our Schools Better"). In this geyser of platitudes mixed with opinions on testing, charter schools, and class size, never mentioned is the word "competition" or any of its variants. Not once. ("Choice" appears twice,

irrelevantly: first in the phrase "college of their choice"; second in the term "multiple-choice tests.")

Debating how to improve education, the writers focuses only the relative merits of testing, various funding formulas, and class size while ignoring the fact that each government school has a captive pool of students, and that government schools get their revenues not from paying customers but from taxed property owners.

This debate is as useful to the cause of education reform as would be a debate on how to rescue occupants of a burning building that focuses only

on the relative merits of various sorts of fire-retardant clothing that these occupants might be given while ignoring the possibility of breaking openings in the building to create escape routes.

9 July 2011

Editor, The Wall Street
Journal
1211 6th Ave.
New York, NY 10036

Dear Editor:

Writing admiringly that "The autocratic Chinese leadership gets things done fast," Robert Herbold's essay comparing the U.S. to China reveals an appalling infatuation with autocratic rulers ("China vs. America: Which Is the Developing Country?" July 9). Does Mr. Herbold really believe that the U.S. government's refusal to block "pornography and antigovernment points-of-view from our youth and citizens" is an offense, much less one comparable to Beijing's routine imprisonment of political dissenters and suppression of free speech?

And downright obscene is Mr. Herbold's ignorance of history. Praising (!) Beijing's latest five-year Plan, Mr. Herbold giddily announces that "This is the 12th five-year plan and it was announced in March 2011." He then snarls: "Can you imagine the U.S. Congress and president emerging with a unified five-year plan that they

actually achieve (like China typically does)?"

Thankfully, I cannot.

During the first half of the 60-year period governed by the five-year plans that Mr. Herbold so admires, not only did Mao's policies trap hundreds of millions of Chinese people in dire poverty, the Chinese government slaughtered or starved to death between 49 and 77 million of its own citizens. During the past 30 years, China's economy has indeed grown, but not because of any five-year plans. It has grown because of privatization and the freeing of markets - decentralization of decision-making authority of the very sort that Mr. Herbold evidently believes to be ineffective, contemptible, and sissified.

8 July 2011

Editor, Economist.com

Dear Sir or Madam:

How distressing that you and three-quarters of your readers believe the proposition that, as you put it, "an economy cannot succeed without a big manufacturing base" (Economist Debates, June 28-July 8).

While Jagdish Bhagwati argued splendidly against this proposition - and against Ha-Joon Chang's defense of it - an elementary flaw in your proposition went unmentioned, namely, the ambiguity of the word "economy" as used in your proposition.

We might agree that prosperity requires that a great deal of manufacturing occur somewhere. But as long as there is "a big manufacturing base" in the WORLD economy, what need is there for "a big manufacturing base" in the economy of each political entity classified as a nation? If a nation has such a substantial comparative advantage in services that it satisfies with imports so many of its demands for manufactured goods that no manufacturing takes place within its borders, where's the harm? Answer: nowhere. What Prof. Chang, you, and most of your readers see as harmful is a mirage created by the fallacy, in a world with trade, of mistaking a nation for an economy.

Consider Professor Chang's own household. It is, I'm sure, fully specialized in services; it manufactures nothing. Yet

the 'Changese,' as we may call Mr. Chang and his family, consume countless manufactured goods produced by the non-Changese. The Changese acquire these manufactured goods in exchange for their services. Does Mr. Chang worry because the Changese economy has no "manufacturing base"? I'll wager not. So why does he insist that for each political entity called a "nation" to prosper it must have its own manufacturing base?

7 July 2011

Friends,

This month I'm teaching a Principles of Economics course in D.C. for the Fund for American Studies. The Fund just produced this superb five-minute video that explains how amazingly, marvelously wealthy ordinary Americans are - even compared to Americans of just 30 years ago:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FB0EhPM_M4

Ironically, I watched this video after viewing one starring former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich who - mistaking statistical categories for flesh-and-blood people -

asserted that "adjusting for inflation, most people's wages have barely increased." Reich went on to say that only 'the rich' have gained wealth since 1980.

If you have the stomach, watch Reich's video and see if you can count the number of logical errors he commits; here's the link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTzMqm2TwgE&feature=youtube_gdata_player

6 July 2011

Friends,

The Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason just released a new on-line series of short videos on the economics and philosophy of classical liberalism. Steve Davies, Jim Otteson, Aeon Skoble, Jeff Miron, Nigel Ashford, and others discuss various aspects of liberalism; with one exception, all speakers are outstanding:
http://www.learnliberty.org/?utm_source=Faculty%20&utm_medium=Email&utm_content=LL%20Academy%20Launch%202011%20July&utm_campaign=Liberty%20Academy%20Launch

5 July 2011

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

Dear Editor:

According to David Brooks, the fact that "manufacturing employment is cratering even as output rises" is among America's "problems" ("The Mother of All No-Brainers," July 5).

No.

What Mr. Brooks calls a "problem" is what economists call "rising productivity"; its essence is the production of more and more of any given kinds of outputs with fewer and fewer inputs, including fewer workers. And one of its consequences is rising real wages. Without this "problem," economic growth and widespread prosperity are impossible.

Just as the industrial economy was made possible by rising agricultural productivity, today's economy filled with ever-more highly specialized physicians, biomedical researchers, airline pilots, app developers, well-paid pundits, and other workers not employed in the manufacturing sector is

made possible by rising
manufacturing productivity.

To lament growing
productivity, as Mr. Brooks
does, is to lament
humankind's success at
taming the demon of
scarcity.