



## 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.**

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28 April 2012

Editor, Washington Post  
 1150 15th St., NW  
 Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

Jonah Goldberg rightly defends Herbert Spencer from the charge of being a heartless "social Darwinist" ("Top five cliches that liberals use to avoid real arguments," April 28). Spencer was, in fact, a profound and humane thinker who cherished individual liberty, celebrated the rich potential of voluntary action, championed women's rights, vigorously opposed imperialism, and

would never in a billion years have endorsed eugenics. The myth that Spencer was a social Darwinist was created without basis by the historian Richard Hofstadter in the latter's regrettably influential 1944 book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*.

The persistence of Hofstadter's myth was revealed in a telling way five years ago in the *New York Times* when reporter Patricia Cohen wrote "Victorian-era social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer adopted evolutionary theory to justify colonialism and imperialism, opposition to

labor unions and the withdrawal of aid to the sick and needy" ("A Split Emerges as Conservatives Discuss Darwin," May 5, 2007). One week later the *Times* was obliged to offer this correction: "A front-page article last Saturday about a dispute among some conservatives over whether Darwinian theory undermines or supports conservative principles erroneously included one social Darwinist among Victorian-era social Darwinists who adopted evolutionary theory to justify colonialism and imperialism. Herbert Spencer opposed both" ("Correction," May 12, 2007). The *Times* should

have added also that Spencer, while opposed to guild-like monopoly privileges for labor as well as to the welfare state, objected neither to voluntary organizations of workers nor to charitable aid to the sick and needy.

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26 April 2012

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Overlook Eric Weiner's daffy assumptions about the contents and consequences of introductory mainstream microeconomics as taught at Harvard by Greg Mankiw - assumptions that reveal that Mr. Weiner knows nothing of the subject that he pans ("Economists - you say you want a revolution?" April 26). Focus instead on Mr. Weiner's complaint that, because the "alternative" introductory economics course at Harvard taught by Stephen Marglin is offered less frequently than is Prof. Mankiw's course, in semesters when Prof. Marglin's course is not offered "anyone wishing to learn about alternative perspectives on these issues had no option."

No option?

Are Harvard undergrads illiterate? Or can they not find the Widener library? Prof. Marglin recently wrote a book - The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community - to explain his sympathetic take on "alternative" economics. This tome is available at Widener, and it sells for \$18.48 at Amazon.com. (Or is this price too high for Harvard students?) And can Harvard students not surf the web to find any of the countless blogs and other sites that criticize mainstream economics?

If Harvard's young men and women really are so intellectually inept that they learn only what they encounter in formal classroom settings in Cambridge, their protests about the contents of Prof. Mankiw's course deserve to be dismissed as the uninformed ejaculations of mindlessness that, in fact, they are.

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25 April 2012

Programming Director,  
WTOP Radio  
Washington, DC

Dear Sir or Madam:

A listener called your Talk Back line during today's

7am hour to exclaim that "national elections are occasions" in which "candidates and the American people talk to each other about what's important."

Please. Enough with these panegyrics about democratic elections. These "occasions" might help to keep political power less concentrated and less dangerous than it would be otherwise, but they hardly promote constructive conversation between candidates and the general public.

Such conversation requires candor. But each candidate is interested in winning office rather than in exploring the verities. He would deny the truth of the Pythagorean theorem if he sniffed the slightest political advantage in doing so. And his bevy of lieutenants - ever-present on television and radio talk shows - are selected not for their objectivity but for their skills at chicanery and equivocation.

What Adam Smith observed in 1759 remains true today: "A true party-man hates and despises candor; and in reality there is no vice which could so effectually disqualify him for the trade of a party-man

as that single virtue."  
[Adam Smith, *The Theory  
of Moral Sentiments*  
(Indianapolis: Liberty Fund,  
1976 [1759]), p. 259]