

Foreword

Walter Block is one of the great economists of our time. Immensely productive, he has made contributions to virtually all fields of economic analysis and also excelled as a public intellectual. These qualities have gained him admirers from all over the world. They are also palpable in the present collection of his major papers pertaining to labor economics.

Block's prose is crystal clear and simple. While this is a patent blessing for his readers, it is also a token of the thorough command he has of his subject. In the 17th century, the French writer Nicolas Boileau wrote on the art of poetry: "Things that are rightly understood can be stated clearly and in words that flow easily." Boileau's countrymen have always held that his adage applies not only to poetry, but to just any sort of writing, and in particular to the sciences. Abstruse writing is a sign of immaturity, if not incapacity. Plain language and a lucid style are the marks of a master. They are certainly the marks that we find on the following pages. Here, Walter Block deals with some of the most subtle problems of economic analysis, as well as with basic principles that should be known to anyone — but which unfortunately need to be restated to confront ever-recurring errors, for example, the error that minimum-wage laws help to increase the living standards of the population.

There is no need for us to comment on any of these writings. However, there is one overall trait that deserves to be mentioned. Block usually sets forth his ideas through a discussion of the ideas of others. In fact, he is one of the most eminent polemicists in economics today, successor to distinguished polemicists of previous times such as Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and Murray N. Rothbard.

Polemics is the art of learned contention. While poor polemics is not much more than the academic equivalent of bickering, good polemics is one of the most efficient means — and certainly the most entertaining one — of promoting progress in scientific analysis. Good polemics builds bridges between thinkers. It creates common ground. Today, this is more necessary than ever in economics, because the discipline has fallen into an unprecedented state of fragmentation. There is no longer an uncontested body of doctrine providing common ground for a fruitful division of labor among economists; whatever remnants might still exist of such a doctrine dwindle by the day. There are, today, only groups or loosely overlapping networks of scholars, each of which explores the implications of a different set of — often fictitious — hypotheses. Good polemics can bring these individuals and groups together, because there is after all a common ground

called the real world, a world structured by scarcity and thus subject to economic laws. Good polemics can build bridges to this world, as the papers of this volume show. It is no accident that their author is a former student of Gary Becker and a disciple of Murray Rothbard. He is a most competent critic of both the neoclassical and the Austrian approaches, as well as of related theories in political philosophy.

One danger of the polemical form of presentation is to convey a twisted image of the author. Polemicists often appear more hard-nosed and aggressive than they really are. This certainly holds true in the present case. Walter Block is a passionate man and a vigorous champion of truth and liberty. But having known and befriended him for more than 10 years, what struck me most in his character are gentleness, indulgence, humility, and care for others. If I may be allowed to say so, he *would be* a perfect Christian if he had the grace of the Faith. He *is* a distinguished economist, not least of all because he relentlessly builds bridges toward his colleagues, saving them from the seclusion — or shall we say confinement? — that results from the way economic research is practised today.

May this volume reach many readers! I doubt not it will inspire them.

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