

Political Economy and Disciplinary Formation at the  
University of London c.1828

Tom Quick





improve the 'principles on which it is conducted.' In particular, the rapid development of knowledge since the end of the sixteenth century required institutions in less enlightened places than Stewart's Edinburgh to adapt to the times. Indeed, the 'revolution which has taken place in science and philosophy since the time of Lord Bacon, seems obviously to recommend (in a greater degree than has hitherto been effected in most universities) a correspondent change in the plan of academical instruction.'<sup>9</sup> Elites had to reform their own practices if they were to be capable of instructing the rest of the population.

The very machinery that was integral to the development of political economy would assist in this reform. Taking his cue from Baconian natural philosophy, Stewart argued that the diffusion of knowledge enabled by the mechanized printing press would enable an intellectual division of labour. Through intellectual specialization, 'all the varieties of intellect, natural and acquired, among men, aided by all the assistance they derive from the lights which they mutually impart, may be said to be combined together into one great machine, for advancing the means of human knowledge and happiness.'<sup>10</sup> Assisted by improvements in printing, intellectuals could specialize and recombine their efforts to manufacture rational knowledge more effectively.

The most influential of Stewart's pupils who sought to bring these educational recommendations to fruition were those connected with the foundation of the *Edinburgh Review*. The connections between Stewart and the founders of the *Review* have been noted by a number of scholars. All four founding editors - Francis Horner, Henry Brougham, Sidney Smith and Francis Jeffrey - attended his lectures on political economy.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the following passage from those lectures may well have provided inspiration for those involved:

'One circumstance [for the improvement of instruction] which, indeed, has been operating more or less ever since the period of the Protestant Reformation... [is] the wide circulation of occasional pamphlets, and of periodical journals,

Jim Secord has noted how the introduction of steam printing machines during the early decades of the nineteenth century became a symbol for the advancement of 'useful knowledge' during the early nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not the *Edinburgh Review* arose out of a desire by Stewart's pupils to take advantage of the opportunities provided by printing for the so-called 'advancement of learning', it is certain that the 'improvement' of education remained an important goal for those involved with editing it. Stewart's pupils proved highly receptive to his suggestion that the reform of education constituted an important aspect of the science of political economy.



ecclesiastical instructors' in these institutions. Political economy was ignored because 'to come so near to common life, would seem to be undignified and contemptible', even though there could be no measure of intellectual dignity but usefulness.<sup>19</sup> By the mid





devote themselves more to the pursuit of solid and refined learning.<sup>124</sup> But at the same time, contributors to the *Edinburgh Review* portrayed the 'march of mind' as a threat that necessitated further institutional reform and development. As one reviewer put it, 'if ever the diffusion of knowledge can be attended with the danger of which we hear so much, it is in England at the present moment. And this danger can be obviated in two ways only. Unteach the poor, - or teach those who may, by comparison, be called the rich.' The comparatively rich this writer had in mind was not the established elite, who could afford to send their sons to Oxford or Cambridge, but an emergent middling group, which 'though naturally hostile to oppression and profusion, is not likely to carry its zeal for reform to lengths inconsistent with the security of property and the maintenance of social order.'<sup>125</sup> For Scottish poet Thomas Campbell, writing to the *Times* with a suggestion for a new university, the necessity of gaining knowledge was more pre

Rather, it would provide training for new members of the 'professions', to be drawn from the newly self-aware 'middling ranks' of the country.

The projected new university was conceived in accordance with principles of political economy. It was felt that increasing expansion and specialization meant that it was becoming more and more difficult to obtain the general mastery of knowledge that had typified a 'liberal education' during the eighteenth century. One reviewer suggested that as well as

funded by private investors.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to characterise the university as completely under the control of political economists. In addition, politicians, intellectuals and businessmen such as mathematician (and editor of the *Ladies Diary*) Olinthus Gregory, evangelical abolitionist Zachary Macaulay, prominent lawyer William Tooke and financier and Jewish community leader Isaac Goldsmid took an active part in the formation of the faculty. Despite the *Review's* claim that competition between subjects would be 'perfect', the number of subjects that could be included on the syllabus remained limited. The Council therefore played an important role in deciding which subjects were to be offered for study, and by whom they were to be taught.

The appointment of J.R. McCulloch to the chair of political economy at the university contributed to the nascent discipline's gradual separation from moral philosophy during the first half of the nineteenth century. Poovey argues that McCulloch's Ricardo Lectures (1824) show that in his view political economy was not a means by which moral philosophers might inculcate a virtuous society, as in Stewart's philosophy. Rather, the subject was for McCulloch a virtuous activity in itself. McCulloch replaced Stewart's 'divine providence' with the creative power of 'commerce'. Similarly, McCulloch's conceptualization of educational reform did not encompass the whole of knowledge. Educating the masses in political economy alone would be enough to ensure that the public acted according to the 'laws of commerce', which in turn represented the design that Stewart believed was only accessible through moral philosophy. Finally, McCulloch developed a taxonomy of political knowledge that split the collection of statistics (to be undertaken by government), political science (to be concerned with the best form of government) and political economy (which aimed to discover the laws by which society was regulated). Poovey suggests that by doing so, McCulloch sought to institutionalize and professionalize political economy, and thereby offered an alternative to David Ricardo's insistence on the 'mathematical' - and therefore independent - status of the field.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, McCulloch's appointment to the chair of political economy signifies the decline of the connection between political economy and broad-ranging educational reform. Political economy at the University of London was to become profession just like law and medicine.

The foundation of the University of London also constituted a significant location for the establishment of independent specialisms in other fields. In addition to relatively established subjects such as medicine and law, the inclusion in the syllabus of fields of knowledge not conventionally taught at universities such as Sanskrit, Spanish, and English Language and English Literature signified a broadening of the marketplace of knowledge. At the same time, teachers of subjects such as zoology insisted on the independence of their

---

<sup>30</sup> Harte and North, *The World of UCL*, p. 34-37.

<sup>31</sup> Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, pp. 295-306. On Ricardo see Collini et. al. *That Noble Science of Politics*.

