

A Note on Deconstruction

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The controversy over the deconstruction of John R. Commons's regulatory discourse has two parts: the nature and role of deconstruction and its application to Commons. In this Note, I address both topics.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction has been given many meanings, uses, and interpretations, not all of which readily, if at all, comport with each other. Some make sensible claims, others not. One must distinguish between soft and hard deconstruction, and between the theory and practice of deconstruction that have associated political agendas and those that do not. In what follows, I present my own view, stated broadly in conclusionary terms without going into detail.

1. A distinction must be made between deconstruction as a mode of analysis and the specific use and application of deconstruction to a particular topic of study.
2. Deconstruction is a mode of analysis as to meaning (*verstehen*) and is not necessarily a road to unequivocally true meaning or "Truth." Deconstruction enables the telling of a story, but not necessarily the correct story.
3. The same text or subject of deconstructionist study can be examined from multiple, different standpoints. These different standpoints constitute so many different "advance riggings" (story lines, design strategies). These different standpoints and advance riggings will produce different stories and different meanings. The central thrust of deconstruction is to elicit meaning. Meaning can be had from different standpoints.
4. The ability to do deconstruction does not obviate the ubiquitous problem of interpretation. Deconstruction by itself does not generate solutions to interpretive (and other) problems; deconstruction is a tool of analysis.

Deconstruction should be considered a self-referential tool of analysis. The techniques of deconstruction can and should be applied to both deconstruction and deconstructionist applications.

1. One is left with relativism (pluralism)—the coexistence of competing stories, meanings, deconstructions. Relativism here means two things: first, the rejection of any attempt to affirm the correctness or truth of a story or meaning on a priori terms; and second, the affirmation of a necessity to choose which story or meaning is preferred, and correlatively to identify the grounds on which it is established and preferred. One can consider all relevant interpretations without necessarily treating them as equals and without any a priori specification of acceptance or rejection. One can form a conceptual matrix of the different stories/meanings/in-

terpretations and of the interpretative issues on which each takes a position and consider that meaning can be adduced to the entirety of the interpretive venture and not solely to the story emanating from one standpoint alone.

2. What is said above about deconstructon also applies to rational reconstruction in the fields of economic theory and the history of economic thought.

John R. Commons

1. Both Commons's career and work were very complex and are subject to multiple interpretations, between which each scholar must choose.
2. The interpretive conflict regarding Commons seems to turn, at least in part, on the role he attributed to expertise. About that, let me say the following.
3. Commons, in my view, was oriented to the identification and solution of problems in a democratic setting in which the interests of workers and consumers would be given greater consideration than hitherto—indeed, in a setting in which their interests would become operative in the identification, as well as consideration, of problems.
4. The administrative commission was an organizational tool which, in his view, enabled the bringing of technical expertise to bear on complex technical issues. Both the courts and the legislatures did not, in his view, possess the required technical expertise and concentration of specialized attention; the administrative commission did. From this standpoint, one readily intuits an affirmation of expertise and of decision making through the deployment of experts and expertise.
5. The foregoing was reinforced, inter alia, by Commons's emphasis on deliberative over nondeliberative decision making in matters of social reform. Commons understood the habitual, noncognitive nature of most decision making but felt that in matters of social reform arrangements should be promoted that promise an end to rule by either blind habit or irresponsible concentrations of private power.
6. The ideal administrative commission would, in Commons's view, undertake its work utilizing the expertise of a diverse variety of experts. It would, further, undertake the maximum feasible participation of interested parties (or their representatives—especially those he deemed most "enlightened" or "progressive" in each group). It would, finally, both pursue and evaluate its work on the basis of consequences, not on the basis of some a priori position or theory. From this standpoint, one readily intuits both an affirmation of expertise and an understanding that the more or less narrow analysis proposed by any one expert is insufficient.

7. Commons understood that public policy—the product of the administrative commissions, as well as of the legislatures and the courts—was a matter of neither expertise nor consequences alone. (For one thing, different experts would identify and evaluate differently different consequences.) Consequences had not only to be identified, but evaluated; what might be a benefit from one perspective might be a cost to another. Public policy was for Commons both laden with normative content (what ought to be) and something that had to be worked out, not settled upon a priori. No single interested party and no single expert had a monopoly on normative content, or values, or on how things should be worked out.

Conclusion

The interested reader can now proceed to deconstruct both my understanding of deconstruction and my deconstruction of Commons.

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