

“The Intellectual Perspective of John Moorhouse”

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On the Occasion of the Retirement of Professor John Moorhouse, Wake Forest University

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It is certainly an honor to join you today in the celebration of John Moorhouse’s retirement from Wake Forest University. For several months I have been looking for a concise way to describe what it meant to be a Wake Forest student in the Moorhouse era. My dear colleague Bill Evans (another former Moorhouse student and currently University of Maryland Professor) responded that the feeling is easy to summarize: “When I was a student at Wake Forest, I majored in “Moorhouse” and minored in “economics”.”

I see my role this afternoon as a stimulator of memories, reflections and discussion of the Moorhouse era from 1969 to 2006. My remarks are based on both my personal experience as a student (1974-78) and some informal interviews I have conducted over the past six months with selected faculty colleagues and Wake alumni. I have also enjoyed the recent opportunity to read John’s published papers and examine his syllabai. Yet I will try to hold my remarks to 30 minutes, allowing all of you in attendance this afternoon to take the floor and add your own thoughts.

I shall make remarks in five areas: (1) Moorhouse the student, (2) Moorhouse the teacher, (3) Moorhouse the scholar, (4) Moorhouse the builder and (5) Moorhouse the “classic liberal”. To keep myself “on message”, I will use Wake debate technology from the 1970s: 4 by 6 note cards.

1. John Moorhouse the student.

John was born in Bethlehem, PA where his father taught English and speech at Lehigh University. While his father served in the Navy in World War II, John and his mother and sister moved back to his parents’ hometown of New Bedford, in western PA. After the war John’s father accepted a position at Westminster College, a liberal arts school in western PA affiliated with the Presbyterian Church.

Ten years later, in 1957, John’s father accepted a faculty position in the Speech Department of Wichita State University (Kansas). The family moved to Wichita where John’s mother managed a book department of Innes then Macy’s Department Store and John entered high school. During this period John’s father earned national recognition in forensics, where his debate team won the national debate championship in 1965. Upon his retirement in 1979, the annual Mel Moorhouse Debate Tournament at Wichita State was inaugurated.

It was at Wichita High School East where John’s own talents as a debater were developed. After high school, John left Kansas and enrolled in Wabash College, a small liberal arts school in Crawfordsville, Indiana – about 45 miles northwest of Indianapolis. Founded in 1832, Wabash remains one of two liberal arts colleges in the U.S. serving only young men. It has always been independent and non-sectarian, although its founders were Presbyterian ministers.

At Wabash John continued his debate pursuits to the point of national recognition. In 1963 John and his three partners won the National Four-Man Debate Championship, all four eventually becoming professors. Their fields are philosophy, law, speech and economics.

John chose to major in economics and minor in political science, all as part of his determination – except for some passing interest in law school – to pursue a doctoral degree in economics. He claims that he wished he had majored in mathematics and English before earning a graduate degree in economics – hardly a surprising sentiment coming from John. He was constantly urging his Wake students to buttress their skills in math and writing, both for practical reasons and because he appreciated the fundamental building blocks of a liberal arts education.

But if John had not majored in economics at Wabash, his intellectual journey in life may have been quite different. For in the economics department at Wabash, John's life intersected with the man who John acknowledges "had the biggest impact on his intellectual development" of any of his professors. I am referring to Professor Benjamin A. Rogge.

Please let me digress and say a few words about Ben Rogge, who was trained in economics at Northwestern – the same department where John Moorhouse would earn his doctorate. According to the "Library of Economics and Liberty," Rogge "had a gift for rendering into clear English the vital principles of economics, all with a touch of unforgettable humor." When I saw this quote, I said to myself: "Is that Rogge or Moorhouse?"

Here is how John describes Professor Rogge: "He was exuberant, knowledgeable, and a gifted teacher of economics – a larger than life guy. . . Rogge got students to think by asking them questions. He never came down hard on students and thus was able to encourage open discussion among prepared students." Sound familiar? Was that Professor Rogge, or was it Professor John Moorhouse?

John was an outstanding student at Wabash but there were a few German instructors who placed a few blemishes on his transcript. Bypassing many Wabash students with higher grade-point averages, John was selected to give the Commencement address his senior year at Wabash. That selection is no surprise to Wake students who have seen him perform in the classroom.

John's doctoral training in economics at Northwestern University was, to put it mildly, challenging and rigorous. There was Professor Jonathan Hughes, an outstanding scholar and influential teacher of economic history. There was Professor Robert Eisner, a champion of Keynesian macroeconomics who became a stalwart of what modern liberals sometimes call "humane economics." And there was John's dissertation advisor, Professor Richard Heflebower, who taught John industrial organization. But none of these eminent professors would rival the intellectual influence exerted by Professor Rogge at Wabash.

As John followed his father's footsteps into the halls of academia, he interviewed for a junior faculty position at Wake Forest. And what attracted John to Wake? Was it the large and thriving Economics Department? Not exactly. There were a total of four full-time faculty members. When John came to visit the campus, what excited him were the students he met. That was not a fleeting sentiment. It was the beginning of a 30-year love affair between John Moorhouse and the students of Wake Forest. I am sorry, Fran, to say – as if you didn't already know – that there was another passion in John's life.

2. John Moorhouse the teacher.

For those of you who have never been in one of John's classes, you cannot imagine the experience you have missed. It starts with some very basic things. John is a somewhat formal

person – some say it is rooted in an innate shyness, but I am not sure that I believe that. In any event, John routinely came to class wearing a jacket and a tie, indeed I remember him in a well-cut suit. He referred to each of the students in the class as Mr. Jones or Ms. Smith, just as he referred to his colleagues, when in the presence of students, as Professor Wagstaff or Professor Frey. The class would begin with a coherent statement of the learning objective for the day. And then the graphs and equations would unfold steadily and neatly on the blackboard. Guided by notes but never reading them, Moorhouse would introduce a key theorem or postulate: the income-and-substitution effect or the production possibility frontier.

At about the 15-minute mark of each class, there might be an extended period of silence, as John surveyed the class and gracefully strolled to one side of the room to address a specific student. As students in his class, we might begin to feel a tinge of nervousness as well as excitement about what was to transpire. “Mr. Jones – can you describe for the class whether we should be discussing a movement along this supply curve, or a parallel shift in the supply curve?” Always giving ample time for the chosen student to deliver or stumble, Moorhouse might then ask “Ms. Smith – would you care to build on the answer that Mr. Jones initiated?”

Virtually every class would have several extended Socratic dialogues of this form. Some have said that the experience is similar to the Harvard Law School classes depicted in the movie “Paper Chase”. But I am not sure that this analogy is quite right. In my opinion, John’s best teaching was old-fashion lecturing, professor to student. But others insist the Moorhouse was exceptional in using questions in the classroom to induce students to think in new ways. In any event, John Moorhouse was nothing like John Houseman playing the grouchy role of Charles Kingsfield, Jr.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate John is to hear some words from his many students:

David Felman: “You were a demanding young professor with high expectations, but you also took great joy in teaching.”

David Kelley: “Moorhouse’s course in Mathematical Economics was by far the one that helped me the most in graduate school.”

Matthew Burns, now leading a \$5 billion business in France for Proctor and Gamble: “It is the foundational knowledge of economics (that John Moorhouse taught me) that has really been the catalyst to my professional success at P+G.”

Laura Brown Sims: “I still contend that the logical analysis and thought processes that I learned (from Professor Moorhouse) were very key to my career in sales, management, and, now, in operating my own business.”

James Hogan: “At this past weekend’s Orange Bowl game I had the opportunity to discuss your impending retirement with a number of your former students. Many of us were econ majors, and we uniformly agreed that your courses were the most challenging and memorable that any of us took at Wake Forest.”

Jeremy Zeichner: “Professor Moorhouse, I always enjoyed your wit, your challenging classes, and the way you brought economic concepts to life. Thank you for being a true teacher and leader.”

Ross Smith: “Professor Moorhouse celebrated big-picture thinking and motivated me to broaden my intellectual horizons, even beyond economics.”

Ted Gentry: “The important point is that John’s love of learning was what you might call “tough love”. He wasn’t given to intellectual crushes or the latest cute theory. . . John showed us the importance of loving good ideas, and spurning bad ones.”

But John Moorhouse’s influence on his students only began in the classroom. After each class, there were usually a crowd of students surrounding him, both outside the classroom and at his office. And to every Wake student that I knew, John Moorhouse’s door was always open to ask questions, raise issues, and continue the dialogue.

In one advising session, David Kelly recalls John “tearing up the list of grad schools I had thought of and substituting better ones. I ended up at Carnegie Mellon, which turned out to be one of the best decisions I made.” Ross Smith adds “appreciation for the open door on the 8th floor of the library where Moorhouse always seemed to have time to talk.”

Even after Wake students graduate and launch a career, they know that John Moorhouse is interested in their successes, struggles and opportunities. Bill Horton comments: “. . . even after I graduated you were willing to spend time talking with me about making the choice between going to graduate school and going to law school, which was a choice that you had made and I was facing.”

Much more can be said about John Moorhouse as a brilliant teacher but I turn instead to topic 3:

3. John Moorhouse the Scholar.

When John came to Wake Forest in 1969, there was not much writing and publishing in the Economics Department. In fact, there were some who argued that being a first-rate scholar AND a first-rate teacher was impossible. John Moorhouse showed, by his own example, the falsehood in this claim by producing scholarship on topics that were closely related to his teaching interests. And he showed how excellence in teaching and scholarship can be synergistic in the production of learning.

Some have said that scholarship in economics suffers from two common ailments: Too much theorizing without real-world data, and too much data “mining” without a commitment to falsifiable hypotheses grounded in theory. What is impressive about John’s scholarship is that he clearly values the marriage of rigorous theory with in-depth exploration of real-world experience.

John has written on numerous topics from an economic perspective: housing, electricity production, insurance, firearms and the Internet. But for those in the audience who know the least about economics, I think John’s research on rent control in New York City may be the most interesting. There is of course a certain irony about the boy from the Midwest exposing perversity in the daily lives of people in America’s big city. But John sheds a very revealing light on the behavior of landlords in sectors of the New York City housing market covered by rent control. Drawing on basic price theory, John predicts that landlords will not be passive when the rents they may charge tenants are suppressed through regulation. For example, landlords may adjust their behavior by lowering the maintenance of rented units or compelling tenants to purchase replacement furniture. In his empirical study of New York City during the 1960s, he illustrates that those behavioral responses by landlords do not necessarily occur quickly or overtly but they eventually erode the subsidies that politicians think tenants are enjoying from rent control.

In this work, Moorhouse concludes “this is the first study that offers empirical evidence that landlords constrained by rent control adopt alternative mechanisms” to respond to regulation. Yet, he also, with characteristic cautiousness, notes in a footnote that he “cannot offer a satisfactory explanation” of all of his empirical findings. When theory and data are not in synch, good scholars such as Moorhouse do not force nature to confess. They tell it like it is!

Let me turn to the next topic:

4. John Moorhouse the Builder.

As we look at the Wake economics curriculum today, it does not take Sherlock Holmes to observe the hand of John Moorhouse. John has not simply educated thousands of Wake students; he has helped construct a curriculum and tradition that will educate thousands more. The core sequence in microeconomics was designed in large part by John Moorhouse. The popular course in law and economics was designed by John. And the enormously successful major in mathematical economics launched in collaboration with Professor Baxley in the Mathematics Department reflects years of hard work and nurturing by John Moorhouse.

Since my time is running short, I want to turn to a final but equally interesting point:

5. John Moorhouse the Classic Liberal.

I realize that it is politically incorrect to refer to people with philosophic labels but I believe in order to fully understand and appreciate John Moorhouse one must know something about classic liberalism. For those of you who do not read this kind of material, let me provide a few leads.

I am of course using the word “liberal” in the European sense, broadly epitomized by a preference for minimal and dispersed government. Perhaps it is useful to return to the views of John’s mentor, Professor Rogge, who as a classic liberal opposed compulsory state-funded education. Was Rogge opposed to an educated citizenry? Most assuredly not. He sought to make the case for market alternatives to public education that would provide more competition and thus more choices for parents and their children. Rogge’s case is found not only in his own writings but in Milton Friedman’s 1964 classic CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM. Interestingly, some of the original ideas in this classic were first presented by Friedman in lectures delivered at Wabash.

For those of you who believe that public education is a salvation for America’s poor, let me share with you a nugget that I learned from my recent stint in Washington DC at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. There is significant political interest in a Friedman-style private voucher system, largely due to the persistent achievement gaps found in our nation’s public schools. The interest is not confined traditional free-choice advocates. The idea is of growing interest to the leaders of both the African American and Hispanic communities who realize that the achievement gap is not being closed very rapidly through America’s traditional approach to public education. Could we some day see classic liberals and the leaders of America’s racial and ethnic minorities joining hands in making a case for vouchers in public education?

To better understand both Rogge and Moorhouse, it may be useful to reflect on the views of Rogge’s mentor, Friedrich Hayek, who is perhaps best known for his 1944 book THE ROAD TO SERFDOM, a powerful treatise about the dangers of socialism. Hayek was trained by some of the best exponents of the Austrian School of Economics and spent more than a decade at the University of Chicago before returning to Europe in 1961. Hayek won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974 for his work explaining how individuals acquire and utilize knowledge in and by the market process. Moorhouse, like Rogge, like Hayek see a need to strengthen the principles and practice of a free society, and to study the workings, virtues and defects of a market-oriented economic system.

Ironically, I found in more than twenty years of university life that it is sometimes the halls of academia – the supposed bastions of free speech and open inquiry – that are least hospitable to the views of classic liberals. For those of you who aren’t ready to read Hayek but are game for

some lighter, more humorous illustrations of classic liberalism, I urge you to curl up with the writings of Henry Louis Mencken, better known as H.L. Mencken – a journalist, satirist and social critic who is considered one of the most influential American writers of the 20th century. To enjoy Mencken is to share an enjoyment with John Moorhouse. And if you really want to appreciate John, the classic liberal, you will sense why he often remarked to students that neither the Republican nor the Democratic parties offers a consistent vision for a vibrant free society.

Let me conclude by thanking you for the opportunity to kick off this discussion and celebration of John's retirement. I look forward to hearing your views about John's intellectual perspective and his contributions to Wake Forest and humanity.