

# What Qualifications are Required to Talk about Political Economy?

[I have been participating in an email discussion list, called “Uhoh”, focused on the current economic crisis. Many of the people on the list are associated with the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, but some others of us have also been invited to participate. Apparently I was participating too much or too “authoritatively” for a while, and two other people raised questions about my “qualifications”. Here is my response. –S.H.]

Hi to everybody on the Uhoh list,

John A. and Steven H. have raised the question of what qualifications I might have to speak on political economy, or to back up the statements about the current economic crisis that I have posted on this list.

The only “qualification” I have is that I have been studying political economy (mostly on my own) for the past 40 years or so. A number of my essays, letters, and other writings on political economy are posted at <http://www.massline.org/PolitEcon/index.htm> I have also been working on a “Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism” which contains many short definitions and comments on terms in political economy (at <http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/index.htm> ) Mao said “No investigation, no right to speak.” Well I have been doing a lot of investigation. (It doesn’t prove I’m right in what I say, of course!)

Would it help if I had a Ph.D. from Harvard or was a professor at the Sorbonne? I ask that (facetiously) because there are some who only care to pay attention to those who have such credentials. I would think, however, that in *Marxist* political economy that approach of looking for “experts you can trust” will not work very well. Do I need to say why? Of course, for one thing, in today’s world the institutions which issue such credentials and hire the professors are bourgeois to the core.

Given that there are very few Marxist political economists in the world today, and given that *many of them* are also strongly influenced by the Keynesian school of bourgeois economics, we have to take a very different approach towards trying to master the subject. Namely, we have to each educate ourselves and think for ourselves! Yes, we need to read what many others have to say (including non-Marxists), but we have to gradually educate ourselves so that we can properly *evaluate* what the others have to say.

The approach of looking for some expert to tell us what is really going on in the economy just will not work, because there are very few such candidate “experts” and ALL of them (as far as I have been able to determine) have various sorts of shortcomings. (That certainly goes for me too, though I do not consider myself to be “an expert” in the first place.) Thus studying Marxist political economy today is a matter of joining with others in a common quest to understand the

nature of capitalism and what is going on in the current crisis. (This is more or less my understanding of what the Uhoh list was set up to do.) Who is qualified to join in such an endeavor? Anybody who-so-ever! Of course we will want to mostly discuss things with others having our same general political outlook, those who appreciate the contributions of Marx (and Engels and Lenin), those who have actually studied a lot of Marx, and hopefully also some of Lenin, Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin, various Soviet economists, Sweezy, Baran and Magdoff, etc., and also more contemporary authors such as Robert Brenner, Richard Wolff, John Bellamy Foster and many others.

But the goal (I thought!) is not to select one person in our midst to follow, or even one of these past or contemporary writers, but rather to hash out the issues collectively and improve the understanding of each and every one of us.

It seems to me that John and Steven might well have some disagreements and/or doubts about what I have put forward about the economy. Fine! Everybody is welcome to disagree with others on this list, aren't they? But the thing to do when you have such disagreements or doubts is not to launch into an investigation into credentials or some other form of ad hominem attack. Instead, we should raise questions and criticisms of what others say, focus on the actual issues and claims, put forward alternative ideas and theories, and so forth. I certainly welcome any criticisms of what I've been saying.

A forum involving more criticism and debate would I think be more useful, more interesting, more active, and more worthwhile for all of us.

By the way, I am not a FRSO/OSCL member and actually have serious criticisms of it. If that is a problem, or I am proving to be disruptive on this list, or whatever, then of course the moderator can drop me. I won't be offended; just disappointed!

Scott H.

[Postscript: My two critics did not respond to this, and the moderator kept me on the list. So I have continued to post items and comments from time to time. I have also found much of interest in the postings of others on the list. -S.H.]