Stephen Leacock on Political Economy and the Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice

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Keywords: Stephen Leacock; social justice; political economy in Canada; institutionalist critique of neoclassical economics; Veblen's students; humor in economics

Abstract: The best-selling Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) was also a professor of economics and political science, trained by Thorstein Veblen. Leacock's social criticism, read throughout the English-speaking countries, was expressed both as satire and through serious reflections, most notably *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920).

Introduction

"To avoid all error as to the point of view, let me say in commencing that I am a Liberal Conservative, or, if you will, a Conservative Liberal with a strong dash of sympathy with the Socialist idea, a friend of Labour, and a believer in Progressive Radicalism" – Stephen Leacock (1919, p. 232)

Stephen Leacock, "Canada's Mark Twain,"[1] the best-selling humorist in the English language between 1910 and 1925 (Bowker 1973, p. ix) and head of McGill University's Department of Economics and Political Science from 1908 to 1936, was an incisive satirist and social critic like his teacher Thorstein Veblen (see Legate 1970, Moritz and Moritz 1985, Macmillan 2009, Dimand 2017). Unlike Veblen, Leacock varied the sharp, even bitter, satire of *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (Leacock 1914) with the warmer humor of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), depicting the rural values abandoned by the urban plutocrats in the Mausoleum Club and the tame academics of Plutoria University. Although no Progressive in the Canadian sense (see Morton 1950 on Canada's Progressive Party as an agrarian protest movement) and only debatably one in the US sense, Leacock was Canada's best-known social scientist in the "Progressive Era," an outspoken reformer and British Imperialist, a founder of the Canadian tradition of "red Tories" chronicled, in the last days of that tradition, in Charles

[1] However, when the International Mark Twain Society awarded Leacock the Mark Twain Medal in 1935, they cited him as "The Modern Aristophanes" (Moritz and Moritz 1985, p. 266).

Taylor's *Radical Tories* (1982, especially pp. 9-16 on Leacock)[2]. He was a distinguished political scientist who was misunderstood by contemporaries in several ways. "When I stand up before an audience to deliver my serious thoughts, they begin laughing. I have been advertised to them as funny, and they refuse to accept me as anything else" (quoted by Erika Ritter in Staines, ed., 1986, p. 11). In 1933, Leacock refused US$1,000 plus expenses to entertain the American Bankers Association in New York City, but offered instead to speak at his own expense "on the restoration of the gold standard or some equally important subject" (quoted by Frankman 1986, p. 52). Largely because Canadian economists, political scientists and sociologists shared the same academic departments, professional association and (from 1935) journal in his time, Leacock was also often mistaken by the general public and by himself for an authority on economics (e.g. Leacock 1910-11, 1930, 1932, 1933). His disdain for the technical side of economics as incomprehensible, subversive mathematical mumbo-jumbo, forcefully expressed in such works as *Hellements of Hickonomics in Hiccoughs of Verse Done in Our Social Planning Mill* (1936a), produced a reaction against the contemporary acceptance of Leacock as an economist (or, in the case of *Hellements*, as a poet), reinforcing the view of him as just a humorist.

But Leacock, while certainly no master of Marshallian or later economics, had serious contributions to make to political economy as a social critic and political scientist – and as a satirist whose satire was meant no less seriously for being made jestingly. His main work of political economy and social criticism was *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920a), based on six articles he had published in the *New York Times* the previous year, from "Social Unrest After the War" on August 31 to "Socialism in Operation: A

[2] The Conservative Party took the name Progressive Conservative in 1942, when it chose John Bracken, the Progressive Premier of Manitoba, as national leader in the hope of attracting Progressive votes against the Liberals in the 1945 election, and governed Canada under that name from 1957-63, 1979-80, and 1984-93. The Progressive Conservatives were eventually absorbed at the federal level by the Canadian Alliance (originally, as the Reform Party, a right-wing breakaway from the Progressive Conservatives) into what is again the Conservative Party, although most provincial counterparts (e.g. in Ontario) retain the name Progressive Conservative (exceptions include the United Conservative Party in Alberta and the Saskatchewan Party in Saskatchewan, while the provincial conservative party in British Columbia is called the Liberal Party, not affiliated with the Liberal Party of Canada). Non-Canadian readers are exempt from the quiz at the start of the next class.

Prison" on October 5. This was an intensely-felt, serious work of political and social reflection, responding to post-World War I unrest that included, in addition to the Russian Revolution and in the United States the Seattle general strike, the Boston police strike and "Red scare," in Canada the labor unrest exemplified by the Winnipeg general strike and the agrarian protest that brought the United Farmers of Ontario (the provincial wing of the Progressive Party) to office in 1919. Strongly opposed to socialism (but also critical of materialism, unrestrained individualism and inequality), Leacock (1920a) nevertheless saw a need for government to maintain full employment, support the aged and infirm, regulate minimum wages and working conditions, and have high levels of progressive taxation to fund social security. Yet publishing *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920a) and *Winsome Winnie, and Other New Nonsense Novels* (1920b) with the same three British, US and Canadian publishers in the same year contributed to readers' tendency to treat all Leacock's writings as humor – especially since the previous year he had presented his political views in the heavy-handed jests of *The Hohenzollerns in America; With the Bolsheviks in Berlin and Other Impossibilities* (1919)[3] and since, of Leacock's two 1920 books, it was *Winsome Winnie* that over time appeared in eight editions. In a similar juxtaposition, the December 10, 1910, issue of *Saturday Night* had two contributions from Leacock: "Gertrude the Governess" (reprinted the following year in his *Nonsense Novels*) and an article on bimetallism, the fifth of twenty-five weekly articles by Leacock on "Practical Political Economy" (1910-11)[4].

[3] Although David Legate (1970, p. 100) wrote of the title piece that "From the standpoint of popular satire, this was one of his best pieces," Margaret Macmillan (2009, p. 61) characterizes Leacock (1919) as "nasty and not at all funny. At its end, the former Kaiser, now a ragged street peddler in the Bowery, dies of his injuries after a traffic accident." However, the book does include an account of a club raising funds for Belgian war relief (Leacock's first humorous lecture tour was for the Belgian Relief Fund): when the treasurer announces the campaign has a deficit of $200, there is a motion to donate the entire deficit to the Belgian refugees.

[4] "Gertrude the Governess" became famous when, in a political speech, Theodore Roosevelt quoted the sentence in which the lovelorn Lord Ronald "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions" (Legate 1970, p. 55). Leacock's article on bimetallism attracted no such attention.

Political Economist: A Political Scientist Turns to Teaching Economics

Born in England in December 1869, Leacock was six when his family moved to Canada. Educated in languages ("living, dead and half-dead" according to Leacock 1998, p. 3) at Upper Canada College and the University of Toronto, he taught school for a decade ("the most dreary, the most thankless, and the worst paid profession in the world") before going to the University of Chicago in 1899 for a PhD in political economy, writing a dissertation on "The Doctrine of *Laissez-Faire*" (accepted in 1903 but first published in Leacock 1998): "The meaning of this degree is that the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him (Leacock 1912, p. viii). One of Leacock's colleagues at Upper Canada College, Edward (later Sir Edward) Peacock, although teaching English, had recently graduated in economics from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, and later chaired the British merchant bank Baring Brothers from 1924 to 1955 and became the first non-British-born director of the Bank of England. Peacock tutored Leacock in Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890) while Leacock gave Peacock lessons in French so that, chairing a lecture by Leacock in England circa 1921, Peacock claimed "to have been a better teacher than Doctor Leacock because he is now he head of the Economics Department of McGill while I still speak no French" (Leacock 1998, p. xiii). Despite Peacock's claim to have taught Marshall to Leacock, Leacock did not cite Marshall in his thesis and, like his Chicago teacher J. Laurence Laughlin[5], taught "Elements of Political Economy" at McGill from John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (first published in 1848, with the last edition in 1871, two years before Mill's death) for decades, as if the neoclassical economics of Jevons and Marshall had not transformed classical political economy. Leacock was not impervious only to then fairly-recent neoclassical innovations in economics: his protectionist

[5] Laughlin edited an abridged edition of Mill's *Principles*, adding American examples and omitting the chapters on applications to social philosophy that enabled Mill, in his later years, to consider himself as in some sense a socialist. As Frankman (1986, p. 52) noted, Leacock exempted Mill from his aspersions on mainstream economics because Mill was "a human being first and an economist afterwards" (Leacock 1930, p. 165), "one of the makers of the modern world … as noble-minded as he was clear-headed."

views were unshaken by an even older, classical contribution to economic theory, David Ricardo's 1817 numerical example of comparative advantage, half a century older than Leacock himself.

At Chicago, Leacock "took many lectures from Thorstein Veblen and was deeply impressed by him. He had no manner, no voice, no art. He lectured into his lap with his eyes on his waistcoat. But he would every now and then drop a phrase with a literary value to it beyond the common reach. In the first lecture I heard, he happened to say, 'Hume, of course, aspired to be an intellectual tough.' That got me, and kept me; the art of words is almost better than truth, isn't [it]. Veblen's only failing was weakness for lecturing on the Navajo Indians … The lectures, I suppose, were the beginning of what has grown into behavior economics, and institutional economy, which, I thank God, I am too old to learn" (Leacock 1998, "My Recollections of Chicago," p. 6, written in 1942 or 1943). Leacock did not discuss his admiration for Veblen's "beautiful and thoughtful mind, free from anger and dispute, and heedless of all money motive" in print until Leacock (1937, pp. 137-38), but his affinity with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), including use of the phrase "leisure class," was noted by Clarence Ayres (1920), who found Leacock's *Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* "in the spirit of the younger group of 'institutional' economists (who are not mentioned, however); a trained physic might even sense the presence of the spirit of Mr. Veblen" (quoted by Frankman 1986, p. 53) – and the president of Plutoria University[6] in Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) is satirized for tedious lectures on the Navajo. In contrast to his response to Veblen, Leacock "saw very little of Dr. Laurence Laughlin, the head of the department. This was largely my own fault as I was very slow in selecting and starting a thesis and Dr. Laughlin was too busy a man to waste time in mere colloquy with students. We, the students, did not at the time think much of Laughlin's work on money [opposed to the quantity theory]. But later on I have

[6] In *Arcadian Adventures*, Leacock shared Veblen's disdain for the conduct of universities by businessmen yet he later became close to Sir Edward Beatty, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway and chancellor of McGill University from 1920 until his death in 1943. Like Beatty, Leacock opposed the (Conservative) federal government turning two bankrupt transcontinental lines (whose bonds had government guarantees) into Canadian National Railways.

come to think that his books of succeeding years, especially his *Credit of the Nations*, among the best works on economics of peace and war" (Leacock 1998, p. 5). Laughlin, who was a formidable and combative public intellectual (see André-Aigret and Dimand 2018), long remained in correspondence with Leacock, who returned to speak at the University of Chicago in 1917, 1920, 1923 and 1925 (on literature, not in political science or in economics, which his former student Jacob Viner taught at Chicago from 1916; Spadoni, introduction to Leacock 1998, pp. xxxviii-xxxix).

Leacock's first book, a textbook expounding the *Elements of Political Science* ([1906] 1921), established his credentials in that field. Adopted by three dozen US universities, widely used in the British Empire, translated into eighteen other languages, the textbook sold better and earned Leacock more royalties than any of his humorous works. Beyond the standard topics, Leacock included a chapter on "Imperial Federation," although in the 1921 revision he conceded that this was no longer a practical hope. He wrote a scholarly monograph in the "Makers of Canada" series on the men who achieved responsible government (legislative control of the executive) in Canada (Leacock 1907a), contributed to the inaugural volume of the *American Political Science Review* on responsible government in the British dominions (1907b), and in December 1906 was elected to the Executive Council of the American Political Science Association (Staines, ed., 2006, p. 21) so he was an established political scientist by 1908 when he succeeded A. W. Flux as head of McGill's Department of Economics and Political Science. Jacob Viner, by far the most famous economist to study with Leacock (graduating from McGill in 1914), wrote to Leacock's biographer David Legate that Leacock's "teaching of what he thought advanced economics was a farce, and I'm afraid some of us gave him a rough time, until the girls in the class, out of pity for him, asked us to lay off"[7] but was "much more respectful of Leacock as a teacher of political

[7] Leacock opposed higher education of women as distracting to male students but at least once wrote to Laughlin recommending a female student for graduate study in economics at Chicago (and helped pay for the medical education of his sister, Dr. Rosamond Leacock, who became a pathologist at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children). Mill's *On Liberty* and *Principles of Political Economy* meant much more to Leacock than *On the Subjection of Women*. Leacock's gibes at women's supposed incapacity for practical business is ironic given his most famous

science" (quoted by Legate 1970, p. 53). Yet Caroline Clotfelter (1996, p. 38) offered, as a reason to accept Leacock as a serious economist, that "Jacob Viner was his student."

Craufurd Goodwin (1961, p. 193), the leading historian of Canadian economic thought and a proud McGill graduate, judged that "It was unfortunate both for Leacock and for Canadian economics that he was forced to earn a living from a subject which he disliked, was unable to comprehend, and took time away from areas where he made best use of his talents" (see also Innis 1944, Kushner and MacDonald 1976, Frankman 1986, Spotton 1995 and Kushner 2006 on Leacock as an economist). But Leacock was not forced to teach or write economics: he fought for the opportunity to teach economics in addition to political science. He joined McGill's newly-founded Department of Economics and Political Science in 1901 as a lecturer in political science (promoted to associate professor of political science and history in 1906 upon publication of his first book), after a semester as a sessional instructor in history and political science. He was a successful lecturer in political science: Leacock wrote to the *McGill News* in 1936, at the time of his forced retirement, that he "never knew that my students went to Dr. Peterson in 1902 to speak for my permanent appointment" (Staines, ed. 2006. P. 292). The founding head of the department, A. W. (later Sir Alfred) Flux, had studied economics with Alfred Marshall at Cambridge and then become Stanley Jevons Professor of Political Economy at Manchester before bringing neoclassical Marshallian economics to Canada (Dimand and Neill 2010). Flux was not pleased when, without his permission, Leacock strayed from political science and began teaching courses in economics. Flux wrote to Veblen demanding to know whether Leacock was competent to teach economics but,

essay, "My Financial Career" (in Leacock 1910), about his hapless attempt to open a back account. Leacock's defense of women's traditional place in the home reflected personal trauma as well as conservative commonplace: clutching a buggy whip, the seventeen-year-old Leacock drove his drunken, wife-beating father from the family home, threatening to kill him if he ever returned. Leacock never again saw his father, who lived until 1940 (Legate 1970, p. 22; Moritz and Moritz 1985, pp. 58-59, 309-10; Taylor 1982, p. 105; Staines, ed., 2006, p. 441 – but see Alex Lucas in Staines, ed., 1986, pp. 124-25, for skepticism about the story). However, Leacock's opposition to women's suffrage (Leacock 1911 and his 1915 essay on "The Woman Question" reprinted in Leacock 1973) rested largely on suffragist support for prohibition of alcohol.

characteristically, an amused Veblen replied in "curiously vague terms" so "for the sake of peace" Flux let Leacock continue teaching economics (Flux to Principal Peterson, quoted by Legate 1970, p. 42, see also Leacock to Peterson, January 31, 1906, in Staines, ed., 2006, pp. 18-19). In 1908 Flux left Canada for the British Board of Trade and, because of his standing as a political scientist, Leacock succeeded as Head of the Department of Economics and Political Science, at first temporarily (permanently appointed by McGill's Board of Governors only in 1933 when someone noticed that this had never been done).

Succession to Flux as the William Dow Professor of Economics and Political Science did not imply that Leacock embraced mainstream economics. Already in February 1909 he wrote in the *University Magazine* that "economics is being buried alive in statistics and is degenerating into the science of the census" and in April 1910 in the same journal that "Political Economy is that which proves that we can know nothing of the laws of wealth … When I sit and warm my hands, as best I may, at the little heap of embers that is now Political Economy, I cannot but contrast its dying glow with the generous blaze of the vainglorious and triumphant science that once it was," sentiments befitting a student of Veblen (both articles reprinted in Leacock's *Essays and Literary Studies* in 1916 and quoted in Spadoni's introduction to Leacock 1998, p. xxviii).

From Academic to Public Intellectual

Two happenstances transformed Stephen Leacock from a successful Canadian teacher and textbook writer in political science and a shakier teacher of economics to an internationally-known public intellectual who would be commissioned by the *New York Times* to write the series of articles that became *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920a), to receive, by 1920, honorary doctorates from Queen's and the University of Toronto in Canada, Brown University and Dartmouth College south of the border, and by 1923 to be the subject of a volume in the "Makers of Canadian Literature" series (see

Legate 1970, following p. 162, for a photograph of Leacock and Herbert Hoover taking doctorates at Brown in 1917).

In 1905, Earl Grey, the Governor General of Canada (and donor of the Canadian Football League's Grey Cup), asked Principal Peterson for a lecturer to "wake up Ottawa + keep it awake." Every second Friday from January to April 1906, Leacock gave a series of six lectures on the British Empire to students, Cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, civil servants and, at the last two lectures, Lord Grey and his entourage (see Leacock's summary of the lectures in a Toronto speech, "Greater Canada: An Appeal," in Leacock 1973). Leacock called for Great Britain and the Dominions such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada (but not India or African colonies[8]) to join as partners in an imperial federation. His denial that the Monroe Doctrine protected Canada and his urging that Canada build a navy[9] as a contribution to the Empire provoked a rebuttal from the audience by the Minister of Militia. Although Grey found Leacock's otherwise-impressive Ottawa lectures too anti-American ("treading on one's neighbor's corns"), he resolved on "turning Dr. Leacock loose … as an Imperial missionary." McGill University granted Leacock's a year's leave (the original request to the board of governors, made directly by Lord Grey rather than by Leacock, was for two years) to lecture from April 1907 to March 1908 in Montreal, London, Oxford, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Vancouver. The Rhodes Trust sponsored the tour, while Lord Grey promised to pay personally for any cost overrun. "When I state that thee lectures were followed almost immediately by the Union of South Africa, the Banana Riots in Trinidad, and the Turco-Italian War, I think the reader can form some idea of their importance"

[8] Margaret Macmillan (2009, pp. 114-16) documents that Leacock's views about nonwhite colonized peoples and non-British immigration were fully as problematic in modern eyes as those of the Progressives discussed in Thomas Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers* (2016), with the qualification that Leacock sharply revised those views in his writings during World War II, when he denounced "race hatred," and with the exception, surprising for his class and background and the McGill University of his day, that "One of the few prejudices of his time he seems not to have shared is against Jews."

[9] The Royal Canadian Navy, which barely existed at the start of World War I, was the world's fifth-largest navy at the end of World War II.

(Leacock 1912, p. ix). In England, Leacock presented his views on the proper increased role of the Dominions in Imperial decision-making in a colloquial parable about "John Bull, Farmer" that Rudyard Kipling hailed as just what was needed but that Winston Churchill, then a Liberal and Parliamentary Undersecretary at the Colonial Office, dismissed as "offensive twaddle" (Legate 1970, pp. 44-46, Moritz and Moritz 1985, pp. 109-16, and Bowker's introduction to Leacock 1973, pp. xii-xiv). In 1908, when Leacock returned from his triumphal tour of the British Empire and Flux vacated the professorial chair, Leacock was the obvious choice as William Dow Professor of Political Economy and Head of the Department.

Lord Grey made Leacock a public intellectual. In 1910 the British publisher John Lane[10], on a visit to Montreal, happened to pick up a copy of Leacock's *Literary Lapses*, a collection of humorous sketches that Leacock had published at his own expense after they were rejected by Houghton Mifflin, the publisher of his politics textbook. Lane, who had prospered from British rights to Robert Service's Klondike poems, recognized a potential best-seller in the book that he had casually bought at a newsstand to read on the ship back to England and so Leacock's other, lucrative career as a humorist began and flourished (Staines, ed., 2006, pp. 58-87). With assistance from Lord Grey and John Lane, from his own wit and charm, and from economics and political science sharing the same department at McGill (as at other Canadian universities such as Toronto, Queen's and Saskatchewan), Leacock acquired extraordinary prominence as a Canadian political economist, public intellectual and popular and scholarly writer by the time that Jacob Viner found Leacock's teaching of advanced economics farcical (which, in turn, was Leacock's opinion of economics). Leacock went on to publish sixty or so books and hundreds of articles ranging from scholarly articles (Leacock 1928, 1935, 1943 on the economics of aviation, "What is Left of Adam Smith?" and the need for geographical science, respectively) to newspaper serializations of his humorous books (e.g. Leacock 1912, the oft-reprinted *Sunshine Sketches*

[10] John Lane was the father of Allen Lane, who founded Penguin as a paperback imprint for the family firm.

of a Little Town, was originally commissioned as twelve articles in the *Montreal Star*) and of his more serious books (e.g. Leacock 1937, winner of the Governor General's Award for Nonfiction, serialized as twenty-seven articles in the *Globe and Mail* and twelve in the *Montreal Star*). Even the four-act stage version of *Sunshine Sketches* appeared in *Maclean's Magazine* from May to July 1917 (with articles by Leacock in seven of the other monthly issues that year).

Few if any other economics professors had either such a wide audience or Leacock's problem that his audience expected his work to be funny. As another admirer of Veblen remarked, in the best-known evocation of bygone small-town Ontario since Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches*, "Humor is richly rewarding to the person who employs it. It has some value in gaining and holding attention. But it has no persuasive value at all" (John Kenneth Galbraith 1964, p. 76).

The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice

Stephen Leacock wrote *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* in the shadow of the Winnipeg general strike (see Bercuson [1974] 1990, Kramer, *When the State Trembled*, 2010, and, for the history of the strike compiled by the strikers themselves, Penner, ed., 1973), the Canadian counterpart of the upheavals shaking the world from Petrograd to Seattle at the close of the Great War. A more local provocation was the acerbic young English socialist Harold Laski, who had lectured in political science at McGill from 1914 to 1916. Although a Tory and anti-socialist, monarchist and Imperialist, Leacock was no partisan of *laissez-faire* or free trade and shared Veblen's jaundiced view of the idle rich, including (or especially) Leacock's relatives by marriage: "the obvious and glaring fact of the money power, the shameless luxury of the rich, the crude, uncultivated and boorish mob of vulgar men and over-dressed women that masquerades as high society … The plutocrat, unfettered by responsibility, seems as rapacious and remorseless as the machinery that has made him" (written in 1917, quoted in Bowker's introduction to Leacock 1973, pp. xxiii, xxix). Plutoria, the setting of *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle*

Rich (1914), was no gentle satire but a dire warning of the cultural disaster of modern, urban money-getting (American, in Leacock's mind) threatening the bucolic Mariposa of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), where Leacock's satire had been gentle (even if not always appreciated as such by the residents of Orillia, the model for Mariposa). Leacock had before his eyes the example of his wife's uncle, Sir Henry Pellatt, the extravagant builder of a never-completed castle, Casa Loma, a vast folly that is today a tourist attraction in Toronto (see Staines, 2006, p. 199, for a February 1929 letter from Leacock trying to dissuade his mother-in-law from lending her grandson's inheritance to Sir Henry to use in his failing projects).

"With all our wealth, we are still poor," wrote Leacock (1920a, 1973, pp. 79-80). "After a century and a half of labour-saving machinery, we work about as hard as ever … There are many senses in which the machine age seems to leave the great bulk of civilized humanity, the working part of it, worse off instead of better. The nature of our work has changed. No man now makes anything. He makes only a part of something." But "only a false medievalism can paint the past in colours superior to the present" because of "The universal spread of elementary education, the universal access to the printed page, and the universal hope of better things, if not for oneself, at least for one's children."

Like John Stuart Mill, Leacock distinguished immutable laws of production from mutable arrangements for distribution. "The real truth," according to Leacock (1920a, 1973, p. 114), "is that prices and wages and all the various payments from hand to hand in industrial society, are the outcome of a complex of competing forces that are not based upon justice but upon 'economic strength'" – an opinion more typical for a social reformer than for an economics professor in Canada, or elsewhere, in 1920. Leacock recognized the injustice of the existing inequality and deplored unrestrained individualism, yet he considered socialist utopias such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* quixotic: elected managers would be self-interested and no better or different from current short-sighted, squabbling, corruptible politicians. "Socialism in a mere beautiful dream, possible only for the angels.

The attempt to establish it would hurl us over the abyss. Our present lot is sad, but the frying pan is at least better than the fire" (1920a, 1973, p. 83). He stood firm against inflationary creation of paper money to try to expand output and employment.

If capitalist society is unjust but socialism is unpracticable, what is to be done? Leacock (1920a) called for public support of the aged and infirm, for sanitation, housing, education and children's nutrition, funded by maintaining the high wartime levels of taxation on high incomes and for production to be privately organized and operated but publicly regulated. Minimum wages and working conditions were to be regulated. Recognizing the incentive problems of government provision of employment, he nevertheless held that, providing the wages in make-work projects were low enough to make them a last resort, government should guarantee jobs for all. Written by a Tory, but in the context of general strikes and fear of revolution, it is an approach that sounds more Progressive (in the American use of the term) than Tory, let alone Imperialist. Once the crisis of general strike and potential world revolution abated, Leacock turned from remaking the world to amusing it, carrying on from *Winsome Winnie* (1920b) more than from *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920a), and he also attended to his teaching career, revising *The Elements of Political Science* ([1906] 1921). But *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* was the fullest revelation of the serious social analyst and reformer who was to be so often overlooked in the public's preoccupation with the humor of "Canada's Mark Twain." When Canada was gripped by another convulsive crisis, the Great Depression, such ideas from Leacock (1920a) as minimum wages, regulated working conditions, government regulation of business, and government responsibility for the unemployment reappeared in the "Bennett New Deal," proposed in radio talks by Prime Minister R. B. Bennett that were published with a preface by Stephen Leacock.

The Later Leacock

Upholding the British connection against closer American ties, Leacock had campaigned for the Conservatives in the 1911 election against Liberal Prime Minister Laurier's reciprocity treaty for tariff reduction with the United States[11]. In *Economic Prosperity in the British Empire* (1930) and *Back to Prosperity: The Great Opportunity of the Empire Conference* (1932), Leacock responded to the Great Depression by embracing what was then being promoted in Britain by the Canadian-born newspaper publisher Lord Beaverbrook as Empire Free Trade, the British Empire as a trading block with internal free trade but an external tariff wall (although Leacock's booklets did not mention Beaverbrook's Empire Crusade)[12]. Even though the US had begun tariff hikes with the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, most economists doubted that a trade war between the British Empire and the United States would have benefitted Canada, or that the world depression could be ended by taxing trade. According to Margaret Macmillan (2009, p. 90), "When Keynes was asked by an English publisher for his opinion on Leacock's … *Economic Prosperity in the British Empire*, on how to deal with the Depression, he dismissed it as 'extraordinarily commonplace' and recommended against publication." The Macmillan Company of Canada published Leacock (1930) in Toronto, but the parent company did not publish it in Britain.

More helpfully (but unoriginally), Leacock (1933), an eighteen-page pamphlet, proposed public works, lowering tariff walls, and reducing the gold content of the Canadian dollar, but insisted that reducing the metallic value of money be done without any price inflation. Myron Frankman (1986, p. 56) claimed that "some of the central elements of analysis and policy in Leacock's 1933 *Plan to Relieve the Depression* are at the heart of Keynes's *General Theory*" merely because Leacock (1933, p. 1) remarked that a worker thrown out of work spends less, causing further contraction. Such secondary rounds of spending and employment were well known to Walter Bagehot and to Alfred and Mary Marshall, and even appeared

[11] Reciprocity was rejected at the Canadian election of 1911, but at the time of writing, ratification of the successor to the North American Free Trade Agreement is before the US Congress.

[12] At the time of writing, as Britain is about to leave the European Union, advocates of Brexit again dream of Britain leading a Commonwealth trading bloc based on the former British Empire.

in a funeral oration by Pericles as reported by Plutarch. As Frankman conceded, Leacock lacked Keynes's explanation of how an initial change in spending and employment would lead to a finite change in equilibrium income and employment rather than unbounded contraction or expansion. Faced with an impending election after years of ineffectual response to the Great Depression, R. B. Bennett, Conservative Prime Minister since 1930, gave five radio addresses in January 1935 belatedly proposing an activist "New Deal" for Canada (Bennett 1935, and see Wilbur, ed., *The Bennett New Deal: Fraud or Portent?* 1968), following on the previous year's creation of the creation of the Bank of Canada[13]. Leacock, who had campaigned with Bennett against free trade in 1911, was consulted by Bennett about monetary policy and wrote the introduction to the published version of the radio talks, but wisely declined Bennett's invitation to stand as a Conservative in the 1935 election in Orillia, site of Leacock's summer home (see Legate 1970, p. 197, for Bennett's flattering letter offering nomination). Acts for minimum wages, unemployment insurance and other reforms were passed by Parliament but rejected by the Supreme Court of Canada and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council as intruding on the powers of Canada's provinces.

In the *Atlantic Monthly*, Leacock (1936b) rebuked Keynes for using mathematical formulas, imagined well-known poems such "The Charge of the Light Brigade" translated into mathematics, and pronounced that "Mathematical economics is what in criminal circles is termed 'a racket'" (Macmillan 2009, p. 91, Clotfelter, ed., 1996, p. 60). Although Leacock insisted in the preface to *Hellements of Hickonomics in Hiccoughs of Verse Done in Our Social Planning Mill* (1936a, pp. vi, x)[14] that readers "will find no ill-

[13] To Leacock's "heartiest approval," his former student Graham Towers became the first Governor of the Bank of Canada, serving for two decades: "Graham Towers has distinguished himself as that happy combination of a practical banker and theoretical economist for which the world usually looks in vain" (Leacock, "Graham Towers," *McGill Daily*, December 5, 1934, quoted by Fullerton 1986, pp. 18, 21). In 1943 Keynes, supported by Peacock, proposed Towers to head the Bank of England (Fullerton 1986, pp. 192-94). Nearly three quarters of a century later a governor of the Bank of Canada was translated to the Bank of England but in 1943 the Court of Directors was appalled at the suggestion of electing a colonial and "a dollar man" as governor.

[14] Leacock considered *Hellements* his favorite among his entire lighter output (Legate 1970, p. 208) and it is excerpted in Clotfelter (1996, pp. 125-26) but "I had a hard knock when I got my New York publishers returns. – My poor Hickonomics didn't sell at all!" (Staines, ed., 2006, p. 294). Nonetheless his economic views remained in

nature in it," he declared that "Forty years of hard work on economics has pretty well removed all the ideas I ever had about it. I think the whole science is a wreck and has got to be built up again. For our social problems there is about as much light to be found in the older economics as from a glow-worm[15]. Only one or two things seem to me clear. Cast-iron communism is nothing but a penitentiary." Among the few economic truths that did seem clear to him (1936a, p. ix), "I do not mean … to deny the need and the expediency of tariff protection. We are not yet ready for the Kingdom of Heaven of Universal Free Trade. In our present world it would tend to force down the wages of all nations to the wages of the lowest" although he did think that the post-First World War world had "gone tariff-mad." Monetary heretics, such as the Social Credit regime that won office in Alberta in 1935 (see Leacock 1937), were no more insightful than mainstream economists: "my old friend and one-time colleague[16], Professor Frederick Soddy … and others hold that the banker in 'coining credit' defrauds the public of what belongs to society at large. Personally I don't see it: as witness below" (Leacock 1936a, p. 55, introduction to the sixth poem).

demand from the press, with his series on "The Gathering Financial Crisis of Canada" appearing in Britain's *Morning Post* starting July 6, 1936, the day after the arrival of Canada's Finance Minister (Moritz and Moritz 1985, pp. 278-79; the articles were published in Canada as a book, by Macmillan of Canada). In the last months of his life, Leacock published a series of ten articles on "What's Ahead for Canada?" in the *Financial Post* from December 4, 1943, to February 5, 1944, expanding an article in *Maclean's* magazine. In January 1936 he had declined to commit to a twice-weekly column in the *Financial Post*, but often contributed serious economic and political articles there. On August 20, 1939, again mixing humor with critique of economics, he published "Lost in the Jungle of Economics" in the *New York Times Magazine*. While primarily directing his economic views to the general public (Leacock 1930, 1932, 1933) and ridiculing academic economics (Leacock 1936a, 1936b, 1939), he also on occasion tried to persuade the discipline (Leacock 1934).

[15] In a chapter "Has Economics Gone to Seed?" (in Leacock 1939, p. 144), he elaborated on this image: "When the world is in danger of collapse from the dilemma of wealth and want, the college economists can shed no light – or only a multitude of crosslights that will not focus to a single beam – in place of a lighthouse, wreckers' signals, or at best, fireworks, elaborate and meaningless."

[16] Soddy wrote his monetary books while holding the chair of chemistry at Oxford but had been teaching chemistry at McGill when participating in the research on radioactivity that won Soddy the Nobel Prize in Chemistry and his McGill colleague Ernest Rutherford the Nobel Prize in Physics. Leacock (1936c) reported that, like mathematical economics, "the whole mass of the Einstein geometry" was dismissed by "the real modern physicists, such as Rutherford and Soddy" as "neither here nor there" (in Clotfelter, ed., 1996, p. 60).

Leacock did not feel obliged to read deeply in contemporary economics before judging it. Carl Goldenberg recalled that Leacock "had his prejudices, particularly against mathematical economists. I always suspected that this was in part due to the fact that Irving Fisher of Yale was one of this breed. He was a teetotaler [and Prohibitionist] and so Leacock had no use for him or his approach to economics. I remember buying Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* when it appeared in 1936 and proudly showing it to Leacock. He opened the book but, unfortunately, at one of the few pages with algebraic equations. He thereupon threw it down and, in disgust, as he walked away, said: 'Goldenberg, this is the end of John Maynard Keynes'" (Collard, ed., 1975, p. 49)[17]. Ridiculing the formula for Keynes's investment multiplier (which Leacock garbled in attempted quotation), Leacock (1936c) declared, "Now I do not know what all that Delta and Y stuff just quoted means, but I am certain that if I did I could write it out … plainly and simply" (in Clotfelter, ed., 1996, p. 60).

In 1936, to Leacock's widely-publicized outrage[18], he was one of thirteen professors retired by McGill University upon reaching the age of sixty-five. As Lewis Douglas (McGill principal from 1937 to 1939) recalled regarding another case, retirement was mandatory at sixty-five but "There were, however, escape clauses" (Collard, ed., 1975, p. 246). Such "escape clauses" would no doubt have been invoked for Leacock's benefit by General Sir Arthur Currie, commander of the Canadian Corps in World War I and then from 1920 Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill. But Currie, Leacock's student at Upper Canada College in the 1890s (see "Generals I Have Trained" in Leacock 1945), had died in 1933. Leacock's

[17] Margaret Macmillan (2009, pp. 89-90) suggests that the only book by Keynes that Leacock seems to have read thoroughly was *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), not likely to appeal to the fervent Imperialist who published *The Hohenzollerns in America* the same year. Myron Frankman (1986, p. 53) reported that Leacock's handwritten chapter outline in 1926 for a never-completed anthology of political economy since Adam Smith included Keynes along with Frank Taussig, Gustav Cassell and Norman Angell (but not Veblen) for the 20th century, but that Keynes's name was crossed out.

[18] His statement in the *Montreal Star* was "I have plenty to say about the governors putting me out of the university, but I have all eternity to say it in. I shall shout it *down* to them" (Legate 1970, p. 200). Legate (1970, p. 210-11) reported that "In an editorial the *New York Times* saw benefits for any American university which might employ Leacock 'to smoke at its post-graduate students,' or create a post of resident wit or satirist" and that the University of British Columbia offered him a professorship in economics.

outrage against being retired had a weakness: in January 1935 Leacock had written and printed a four-page "confidential and not for circulation" pamphlet of *Suggestions for Economy at McGill*, expanded as *The Restoration of the Finances of McGill University, Suggestions Submitted to the Consideration of My Fellow Members of the University*, proposing to save money by pensioning off senior professors nearing retirement age, not just those actually at retirement age (Legate 1970, p. 196, Staines, ed., 1986, p. 151), with the unspoken, and in the event unfounded, assumption that of course he would be exempted.

Conclusion

First as a lecturer upholding Canada's place in the British Empire and then as a best-selling humorist, Stephen Leacock attracted an audience exceptional for a professor of economics and political science while his success as a political scientist combined with appointment to head a two-discipline department gave him a more debatable public standing as an economist. Although the success of his popular writings also gave him a vast audience for books and newspaper and magazine articles on serious political and economic subjects, it also led to his being pigeonholed as a humorist. But though he was indeed a humorist and a "character" (and a Tory and Imperialist), and though he disdained, and lacked training in, technical economics (unlike political science), Leacock was a social scientist and political economist in the tradition of Mill who thought seriously about social justice and the alleviation of inequality and poverty, as well as a fierce critic and satirist of plutocracy, the idle rich and mainstream economics in the tradition of his teacher Veblen, while also upholding the gold standard and stridently warning against inflation in the tradition of his teacher Laughlin (see Leacock 1945a, 1945b). Leacock occupied an extraordinary position in political economy in Canada and to an extent in other English-speaking countries in the "Progressive era."

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