THE THOMAS JEFFERSON CENTER

For Studies in Political Economy

BY JAMES M. BUCHANAN

Director, Thomas Jefferson Center, and Chairman, Department of Economics, University of Virginia

The Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy was organized at the University of Virginia in 1957, and it is still in the early stages of its operation. This article will tell readers of the News Letter something about this Center: the ideas behind its organization, its general aims and purposes, its administration, its operations to date, and its plans for the future. Those of us who are directly involved in the work of the Center think that it should, and will, become an important part of the over-all program of the University. But we recognize that the growth and the development of the Center will depend upon support, not only from those on the Grounds, but also from many others in the community beyond.

Why was the Center Organized?

The Thomas Jefferson Center strives to carry on the honorable tradition of "political economy" — the study of what makes for a "good society." Political economists stress the technical economic principles that one must understand in order to assess alternative arrangements for promoting peaceful cooperation and productive specialization among free men. Yet political economists go further and frankly try to bring out into the open the philosophical issues that necessarily underlie all discussions of the appropriate functions of government and all proposed economic policy measures. They examine philosophical values for consistency among themselves and with the ideal of human freedom. Adam Smith was writing as a political economist when he composed The Wealth of Nations, and it is not surprising that this first great book in the field appeared in the same year as the Declaration of Independence.

In the century from 1750 to 1850, political economists were among the intellectual leaders guiding those political changes that had the result of removing many artificial restraints upon individual choice and initiative. The release of human energies made possible by such widening of the range of individual choice produced something new in history: free society, as we now conceive it, was unknown three hundred years ago. Civilized society in the West was launched on a progressively accelerating improvement in material standards of well-being previously undreamed of, and, much more importantly, this improvement was accomplished by an expansion, not a contraction, of the freedom of individual citizens.

We live today, in the Western World, on the heritage of this greatest of all revolutions in human history. The earlier or "classical" political economists remain important to us because of their influence in laying the foundations for these modern institutions. And the reading of their works continues to be a necessary part of one's process of coming to understand the world in which we find ourselves.

But with the march of time come great social changes. As these changes have occurred over the last century, political economy and political economists seem to have become increasingly less influential. The increasing specialization of knowledge and scholarship has forced a separation between the economics and the political philosophy involved in particular issues. Economics and Political Science have become two separate academic disciplines. Students now spend their entire careers examining tiny areas within each of these broader fields. As a result, few social scientists today have the competence or interest in studying broad issues of policy which is required for intellectual leadership. Scholars totally absorbed in the minutiae of their particular disciplines can contribute to knowledge; yet it is essential that some scholars concern themselves with issues requiring broader examination.

A society is guided by its ruling philosophy — the prevailing conception of the "good" social order. Some political-economic philosophy must be the basis for intelligent social policy. Forthright and continuing discussion is necessary if this conception is to serve as a clear and coherent guide on numerous particular issues. Otherwise, statesmen and citizens will continue to lose their bearings amid the economic and social complexities of the mid-Twentieth Century.

Study of political-economic philosophy is the basic content of political economy. Political economists try to stimulate open and lively discussion of how a free society should be organized and preserved. And they go further. They examine and discuss the whole set of current policy issues in the light of some conception of the "good" society.

The fruits of Western civilization have perhaps been so bountiful that nations will not relinquish them voluntarily through orderly democratic processes. It is now widely recognized that the great appeal
of Communism is largely limited to those areas of the world which have never really enjoyed the free society. But this reversal of Marxian predictions should not null citizens of Western civilization into thinking that free social institutions, including the free economy, are more or less automatically guaranteed to us. There is, on the contrary, an ever present danger that these institutions, which are vital to the preservation of individual liberty, may be undermined and eroded through an overly-close attention to current minor irritations in the social fabric, accompanied by heedless neglect of larger issues of more lasting importance. Twentieth century American democracy can well commit the irrevocable sin of "social carelessness," of allowing its institutions to be modified out of all recognition, of allowing them to be divorced bit by bit from their original intent and purpose in the social structure. Individual liberty or freedom remains the fundamental organizing principle of the free society, and the temporary pursuit of will-of-the-wisp current objectives at the expense of individual freedom must be examined much more carefully and thoroughly than scholars and policy makers now seem willing to attempt.

Out of ideas such as these, the Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy was born. The Center represents the institutional embodiment of an effort deliberately made to bring about a rebirth of Political Economy.

The Center and the University

It is particularly appropriate that this Center should have been established at the University of Virginia. Although Mr. Jefferson's wide and varied interests and activities allowed him little time for the study of political economy in the specific sense, the ideas imbedded in his political writings parallel those of the "classical" political economists. The importance of Virginia and Virginians in the framing of the constitutional and legal structure of the United States is well known, but perhaps the importance of this structure itself in shaping the whole of the society that we enjoy is too often overlooked.

The University of Virginia appears a proper setting for a Center devoted to re-examination of the whole political-economic structure, to a more broadly based approach to particular social issues, and to a hard-headed confrontation of modern institutional changes with underlying individual values.

What Is The Center?

Research is, of course, central to the program of the Thomas Jefferson Center. But it is not conceived primarily as a research organization in the more commonly accepted usage of these terms. Positive attempts to "buy research" in any specific area of interest seem questionable on several grounds. The Thomas Jefferson Center is conceived rather as a community of scholars who share a common interest in social philosophy. The Center serves as a means of identification, of association, for those scholars. It tries to provide them with an environment within which they will be individually motivated to undertake research. But such research must come from the individual interests of the cooperating associates; the Center does not, in any way, suggest or promote specific studies. Those studies which do come out of the Center — and we hope there will be many and important ones — are produced as a result of individual scholarly effort.

Education is, of course, central to the Center's total program. But again the Center is not primarily conceived as serving directly an instructional task. Political Economy, as a discipline, contains few formal aspects that are not to be found in the institutionally organized disciplines of the social sciences. The technical competence of students and scholars must be gained by a study of those disciplines. The attempt to inaugurate a special curriculum in Political Economy would represent a still further step toward undesirable specialization. In accordance with these views, the Center offers no courses; it grants no degrees. With its instructional as with its research function, the Thomas Jefferson Center serves as a means of identification, of association, for students and scholars. By creating an environment in which discussion and debate on fundamental issues can proceed, by providing intellectual stimulation for such discussion, and by encouraging individual participation in such discussion, the Center aims at supplementing and enhancing the educational job accomplished through the acquisition of technical competence in the regular academic disciplines. In this way, the Thomas Jefferson Center hopes to accomplish the general aims set forth in its initial descriptive brochure, which was widely distributed in late 1957:

"The Center is organized to promote scholarly discussion of the basic ideals of Western civilization and of the solutions to modern social problems most in accord with those ideals.

The Center is a community of scholars who wish to preserve a social order based on individual liberty. The Center will encourage students to see the philosophical as well as the technical issues entering into problems of social organization."

What Does the Center Do?

What, specifically, does this Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy do? First of all, and perhaps most importantly especially during its formative years, the Center brings to the University community each year a Distinguished Visiting Scholar. This scholar is selected for his interest in political economy and social philosophy, and for his demonstrated ability and competence. This scholar is widely known and respected. When he is in residence at the Center, the visiting scholar participates actively in the intellectual life of the community; he delivers public lectures; he conducts small informal seminars with graduate students and research associates. Secondly, the Center sponsors specific individual lectures or seminar discussions by invited guests. These lectures and discussions fall outside the regular academic program of the University.

Thirdly, the Center grants fellowships to graduate students and to post-doctoral candidates. These fellowships are awarded on the basis of ability and indicated interest in political economy, and they may
be awarded to students in any of the social sciences. Graduate students who receive these fellowships must, of course, secure admission to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and pursue courses of study approved by the regular academic departments. Applications for these graduate fellowships are invited from all students in the social sciences interested in political economy as an integral part of their over-all graduate program. Post-doctoral fellowships are awarded to young scholars who have demonstrated research competence. Through the post-doctoral fellowships the Center hopes to encourage young scholars to undertake research among the lines of its indicated interest.

Finally, the Center acts as a clearing house through which independent research projects by permanent members of the University faculty are administered. Staff members become Research Associates of the Center while the projects are being carried out.

**Participation in the Center's Program**

It has been stated above that the Thomas Jefferson Center is a community of scholars. It is a voluntary community, and from this it follows that participation in its activities is open, informal, and flexible. The Center is dedicated to the idea that mutual advantages are to be gained from serious scholarly discussion of vital issues of social philosophy. This discussion may take the form of public lectures, seminars, forums, or written interchange of ideas; the forms themselves are flexible. Interested scholars at all levels, both from within the University and beyond, are urged to visit the Center, to attend the announced lectures, and to participate even more actively in the smaller seminar and group activities. Indeed one of the fundamental aims of the Center is that of widening the community of discourse, and it will not have served its purpose if, over the long run, participation is not extended.

**How is the Center Administered?**

The Thomas Jefferson Center is administered by a Director, an Associate Director, and an Executive Secretary. This staff acts with the advice and counsel of an Advisory Committee.

James M. Buchanan, who is also chairman of the Department of Economics, is currently serving as Director. G. Warren Nutter, who holds a professorship in the Department of Economics, is Associate Director. Assistant Professor Leland B. Yeager is serving as Executive Secretary. The Center has independent offices and a separate clerical staff in Rouss Hall on the Lawn.

The Advisory Committee currently is composed of the following members; the first three are ex officio:

- Colgate W. Darden, Jr.
- President of the University
- William L. Duren, Jr.
- Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
- Lewis M. Hammond
- Dean, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

**How is the Center Supported?**

Although independently organized, the Center's whole program is complemented and supported by the regular academic program of the University. The staff members and the research associates of the Center hold permanent academic appointments in the regularly constituted departments.

Financial support for the Center has been provided by grants from foundations that have expressed their interest in the program, as well as by the Center itself. Support for the Center's research projects, seminar activities, fellowship awards, and provides for certain of the clerical and operating expenses resulting from the operation of the Center as a separate entity. Foundation support has also been secured from independent research projects administered through the Center.

**Operation in 1957-1958**

The work of the Thomas Jefferson Center was seriously begun during the academic year 1957-1958. The first public lecture under the sponsorship of the Center was delivered on September 20, 1957 by Peter T. Bauer, Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, and Smuts Reader in Commonwealth Studies at Cambridge University. Mr. Bauer, who is the author of several books on economic problems of underdeveloped countries, spoke on "Adam Smith and Our Political System," and by Professor Ronald H. Coase of the University of Buffalo on "The American Broadcasting System." A special visitor and lecturer who provoked much interest was Professor Josef Pajestka, member of the faculty of the University of Warsaw and of the staff of the Polish Economic Council. He discussed, both in a public lecture and in a seminar, the problems of planning faced in socialist economic systems.

In addition to these special lectures, the Center joined with the Woodrow Wilson Department of Foreign Affairs and the School of Law in sponsoring an address by M. Robert Schuman, former Premier of France and a leader in the organization of the European Coal and Steel Community. M. Schuman spoke on "Problems of Western European Economic Integration."

**Prospects for 1958-1959**

The Center became fully operative with the beginning of the 1958-1959 academic year in September 1958. Eight graduate
fellow and one post-doctoral fellow are directly associated with the Center.

Dr. Overton H. Taylor of Harvard University will serve as Visiting Scholar for the first half of the 1958-1959 academic term. He will give a series of four lectures in the fall of 1958 on the general theme of Economic Theory and Political Philosophy.

Dr. Gordon Tullock, who has been trained in both economics and law, has been awarded the first post-doctoral fellowship to be granted through the auspices of the Center. He will be in residence during the 1958-1959 academic term, and he will be at work completing his book on bureaucracy, which has been tentatively entitled "Inside Bureaucracy."

Plans for Future Years

The Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy is now a going concern. The program over an initial formative period has been deliberately limited, but as the Center becomes a more permanent feature of the University community and of the intellectual community more broadly conceived, plans for selected, although still limited, expansion have been made. Some initial thought has been given to a series of publications under the sponsorship of the Center, resulting either from the lectures delivered at the Center or from research projects administered through the Center. The possibility of summer seminars bringing together young scholars in the social sciences has been discussed. Other ideas for development are certain to present themselves as the Center itself continues operation. We at the Center will welcome suggestions and encouragement from members of the University and from the community beyond.

We hope that the operation of the Center can be sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation and change to meet new conditions and to respond to new challenges, but the general aims of the Center will endure, however. The effects of the Thomas Jefferson Center on the intellectual attitudes of the University community and upon the more general field of scholarship in the social sciences will be gradual, and they will be difficult to appraise. But, for those of us who have been instrumental in getting the Center underway, there is an underlying confidence that the Center will have an impact, that the course of scholarship will be modified by the Center's program, even if in a small and, at the present, wholly unpredictable way.

Note: Those who wish to receive the News Letter on a regular basis may do so by sending in a request. It is suggested that the complete address be given, and that, in many instances, the residential address is to be preferred over a business address. Institutions, in addition to individuals, may also receive the News Letter if an officer of the institution will so indicate.

—The Editors