

Social Sciences with A Human Face

Lok Sang Ho

Head, Department of Economics, and
Director, Centre for Public Policy Studies, Lingnan
University

Terence Pang in his thought-provoking article in this issue of the Lingnan Commentary says, “There has been much too much emphasis on the instrumental aspects and the public domain in business and law, and some applied social science disciplines [relative to ethics, aesthetics, literature, critical literacy and oracy, history, sports, and courses related to family etc.]” This is an interesting perspective, and directly addresses the question of what makes liberal arts education.

Terence’s words brought back memories about how I was motivated to study Economics in 1969. I had studied English Literature in my matriculation years, and two authors, Bernard Shaw and E.M.Forster, had a big impact on me and had indeed motivated me to study Economics. As many people know, Shaw was a member of the Fabian Society and he had been deeply interested in economics and the society, and his introductory discourses written for his celebrated plays are extremely thought-provoking critiques of policy and prevalent views. As for Forster, an episode in his novel *Howards End* depicted one gentleman forgetting to bring back his umbrella and keeping thinking about getting it back, and Forster through the conversation between his characters suggested that while people in the upper class never think of such trivial things as an issue people in the lower or middle class think quite differently. In other words, the economic status of a man very much conditions his life—not only what he eats and how he dresses but also his preoccupations—even how he dreams. Reading Shaw and Forster, I made up my mind to study Economics, hoping that I could address such issues as poverty and inequality of opportunity.

Pang’s distinction between “public domain” and “private domain” of education is interesting. Over the years, I have also learnt that we must not fool ourselves into believing that economists can help solve the world’s problems. Try as I may, I have not been able to convince the SAR Government to adopt a single policy that I recommended, although I know that many of my ideas about health policy, education, and public housing should

help Hong Kong. I do not know if my studies in economics and public policy served my own private interest or that of the public. All that I can say is that I hope that my students, and all students in Lingnan, be they students in business, social science, or arts, pursue their studies with a passion—the same passion that I share—as human beings who experience and witness the ups and downs in life.

I call this an education with a human face. We are “privately” concerned about “public affairs.” In a sense as a social scientist I do my work as an expression of this passion, much like novelists or poets write novels or poems as an expression of similar passions. We do not know if we will ever make a dent on what is happening in Hong Kong, but we shall try.

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Contact information:

Tel : (852) 2616 7433

Fax : (852) 2591 0690

Email : cpps@ln.edu.hk

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