

# LETTER TO THE EDITORS: SOME THOUGHTS ON CARL MENGER'S LECTURES TO CROWN PRINCE RUDOLF

BY  
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The author is granddaughter of the economist Carl Menger, but I know him only through the eyes of my father, the mathematician Karl Menger. Karl was the treasured, late-in-life only child. My father, in turn, idolized his father and made sure that his children knew about his father and his father's work. It is a sadness in my life that I never knew any of my grandparents.

The two names, Carl and Karl, have caused quite a bit of confusion. To not further contribute to the confusion, I will refer to my grandfather as “my grandfather” and to my father simply as “my father.” The two spellings of their names is itself curious. When I asked my father to explain this, he said that his father considered the Latinization of names—e.g., changing the K to a C—to be a sort of snobbery, which he would have no part of. In the domain of names my grandfather took another measure. He dropped the “von Wolfensgruen” title from his name because he believed royalty to be an archaic institution and all such titles as pretentious. My grandfather and the prince even co-authored a pamphlet against the Austrian nobility and published it anonymously. The authorship was made public in 1923 in the *Neues Wiener Journal*.<sup>1</sup> Besides, doubted the legitimacy of the title in the first place. My father said he thought that some forebearer had likely simply assumed the title and its implied nobility. Further, when Emperor Franz Joseph wanted to bestow upon my grandfather some higher title, he declined the intended honor, though he was well aware this would displease the emperor. However, my grandfather did accept a gold medal from the emperor, which is now in my possession.

In general my grandfather seems to have been socially quite liberal. His brother Anton was an avowed socialist. In what I believe was ahead of the times, my grandfather was a strong supporter of evening classes for common workers, a sort of continuing education and what later became known as *Arbeiteruniversitaten*. This is a view he seems to have passed along to my father, who always opted to teach the much-disliked (by most faculty members) night classes. My father often said he particularly liked teaching the hard-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/191009/1/1045740209.pdf> (accessed August 29, 2024).

working, serious students who worked all day but cared enough about their education to attend night classes.

Although I am not an economist, I have tried to keep an eye on the field, in deference to my grandfather. So I was interested to learn about a publication of the class notes written by Crown Prince Rudolf of my grandfather's lectures. The book, *Carl Menger's Lectures to Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria*, is edited by Monika and Erich Streissler. I was especially happy to learn that the book included an English translation. Although at one time my ability to read and speak German was proficient, that skill has withered over time and with disuse. It took me a while to obtain the book, so in the meantime I read several of its reviews. I found Karen Vaughn's 1996 review the most insightful (Vaughn 1996).

The main thrust of the editors' lengthy (over twenty-page) introduction is to deduce what Menger thought important in economic thought based on what he taught. I can say, from personal experience, that judging what a teacher believes to be important from what he or she teaches in an introductory class is a fraught methodology. For instance, I taught freshman chemistry and considered much of the material irrelevant to modern chemistry. I taught the "canon." I taught what any educated person was expected to know about chemistry. For example, I discussed the periodic table, then already over 100 years old, but I certainly never discussed my own research, which I, at least, considered important.

In their introduction the Streisslers give substantial attention to two omissions in topics covered. First, the notes largely omit statements about the legitimate roles for government action, and, second, they omit any mention of marginal utility, one of my grandfather's great contributions to economic theory. The Streisslers make sweeping inferences from these omissions.

From the first omission they conclude that the notes are "probably one of the most extreme statements of the principles of laissez-faire ever put to paper" (Streissler and Streissler 1994, p. 17). But Menger himself denied "as 'frivolous' the charge that he was a member of the Manchester School" (Streissler and Streissler 1994, p. 24).<sup>2</sup> He explicitly denies belonging to a laissez-faire school. I see no reason not to take him at his word. From the omission of Menger's own work, the Streisslers suggest that "subjective value notions were not as important to Menger himself as they became to his followers" (Streissler and Streissler 1994, p. 9). The notion that Menger considered his major contribution to economic theory as too trivial to teach is simply not credible.

A more likely explanation for my grandfather's silence on the proper role of government is that he never knew who would be in attendance at his lectures. I was told that occasionally even the emperor would drop in. It is not hard to imagine that Menger, as a young scholar, was reluctant to essentially tell the emperor what to do. As the Streisslers point out, my grandfather's position was a politically dangerous one (Streissler and Streissler 1994, p. 5).

The Streisslers interpret these omissions in great detail. But, as Karl Popper, Carl Sagan, and others have noted, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Thus I find their entire analysis to be on shaky logical ground. The best the Streisslers can manage to justify their methodology is that the omissions are "significant." Maybe. But are they in fact omissions?

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<sup>2</sup> The authors seem overeager to reinterpret Menger's statements. His assertion of not being laissez-faire "sounds forced," or the "oblique phraseology" of his support of government intervention "makes Menger appear far more interventionist than he actually was" (Streissler and Streissler 1994, p. 24).

The editors seem to tacitly assume that the one brief class represents the totality of the discussions on economics between the two men. This is almost certainly not the case, for the two had an ongoing relationship beyond the brief course. My grandfather took the prince on the obligatory “Grand Tour,” which gave the men ample time together to develop an abiding friendship. This tour was more than a sightseeing junket. I was told that the two met with the president of France, Emperor Wilhelm, Otto von Bismark, and other notables of the time. The two even wrote a book together about their travels, which they published under a pseudonym, which, sadly, I have forgotten. I imagine that a copy of the book resides somewhere in the Austrian archives.

After the tour they remained in contact—primarily epistolary contact. My father left the prince’s letters to me with the request that I find an appropriate home for them. I saw to it that they got to the Austrian government. Unfortunately, my grandfather did not keep copies of his letters to the prince, but those too are likely in the Austrian archives. One letter in particular stood out. As my father and I were leafing through the stack of letters, I noticed that one had half of its second page neatly cut off. I asked my father how this came to be. He said that his father had cut off that part of the letter. I asked why he would do such a thing. My father said that the removed portion dealt with very delicate matters of state. His father was afraid that if the letter got into the wrong hands, it could cause great difficulties for the prince, possibly even the charge of treason.

My father also requested that I find good libraries for his papers and his father’s. I donated both to Duke University.<sup>3</sup> Very interesting among the latter was a single copy of my grandfather’s book, bound and printed so every printed page had a blank facing page. He used the blank pages to write his thoughts, notes, and edits.

The nature and extent of the interactions between the prince and my grandfather speak to both the high level of trust between the two and the breadth and free-wheeling nature of the topics they discussed during their informal, and presumably unmonitored, conversations and correspondence.

In summary, I find the transcription of the lecture notes and their translation into English to be a genuine contribution to the history of economics; their explication, less so.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>3</sup> My father also requested that I place other things. His beautiful Bauhaus furniture I donated to the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago. His vast collection of art tiles I donated to a museum in New York.