

### Persuasion and Propaganda in Economic Education: Background Knowledge and Examples

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# Persuasion and Propaganda in Economic Education

## Background Knowledge and Examples



Silja Graupe

### Methodology

#### At a Glance

- This study investigates whether global standardized economics education at the university level involves elements of indoctrination.
- The survey applies language and text based analyses from the cognitive sciences and propaganda research.
- Using two standard textbooks as examples, the survey identifies forms of persuasion capable of fundamentally and subconsciously altering students' (pre-)understandings and worldview.
- The forms of persuasion identified in this study do not conform to criteria of scientific-objective knowledge acquisition as the standard for education.

Using two standard textbooks as examples – Economics (by Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus) and Economics (by N. Gregory Mankiw) – language and text based analyses are applied to identify, in detail, forms of persuasion primarily functioning on the level of the unconscious. This analysis draws upon the cognitive sciences (in particular cognitive linguistics, experimental neuro-sciences and psychology), propaganda research (e.g. in the context of PR and marketing strategies), and learning theory (for example Meyer and Land). The analysis primarily focuses on exemplifying how the concept of the market is introduced in economics teaching.

This study is guided by the cognitive-scientific insight that the majority of human processes of perception and thought occur at the unconscious. These processes of cognition and action fundamentally impact our behavior, yet we remain almost completely unaware of them as they bypass our reflective capacities and our control. Cognition, rather, is determined by what the cognitive sciences call interpretative frames in which language and experience become intertwined without taking thought: „Whenever our brain processes words and ideas, it activates knowledge and contexts gained from previous experiences with the world“ (Wehling 2016, 21).<sup>1</sup> The study examines selected text passages to show how standard economic teaching may influence the way knowledge and its contexts are activated and processed. In doing so, it enters an interdis-

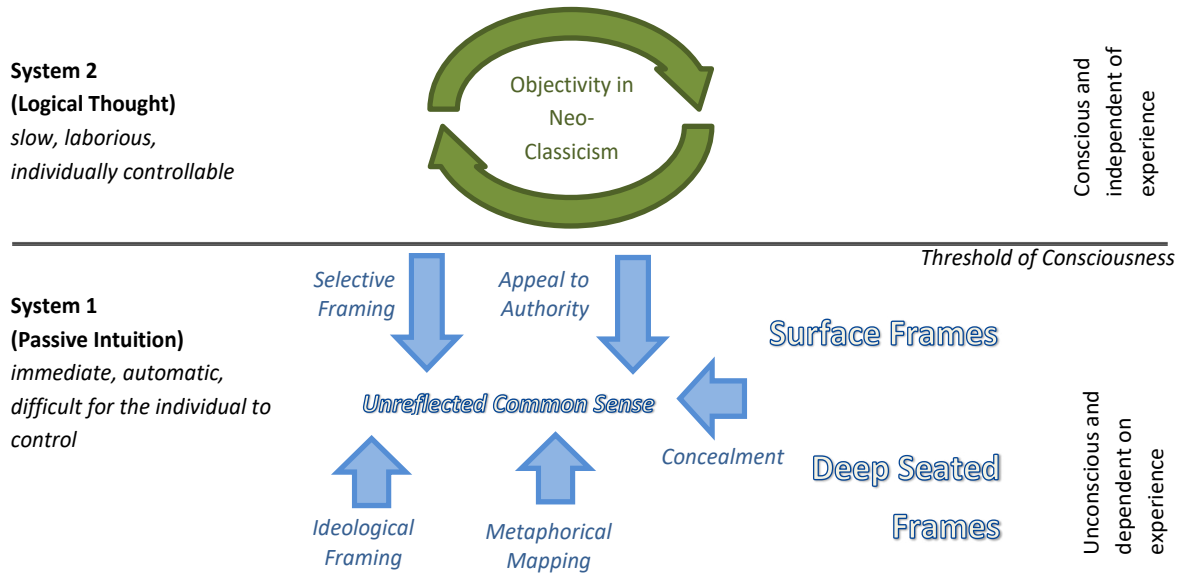
### Cause and Object of the Survey

The study seeks to answer the question whether, and by which means, students of economics education are subjected to indoctrination. For this purpose examples of standard university economics textbooks are investigated regarding their potential for influencing fundamental ways of thinking and acting. How are students led to uncritically adopt not only knowledge but also fundamental worldviews, values and self conceptions?



**ILL. 1**  
**Objective learning processes (green) and modified learning processes (blue)**

Schematic comparison



disciplinary dialogue with the history of ideas and epistemology, thereby establishing a diverse field of perspectives from which to make visible the undetected stylistic devices or rhetorical figures capable of influencing and modifying perception in standard economic textbooks.

**Forms of Persuasion**

In the selected textbooks, forms of persuasion targeting perception and thought on the level of the subconscious have been identified. These forms contravene the usual standard of education by which students are to be trained in scientific objectivity. Instead, the forms of persuasion identified are geared toward modifying so called surface frames, i.e. those levels of the subconscious closest to the surface where the significance of individual words and concepts are implicitly understood. In addition, they also target our deep seated frames, those deeper, unconscious levels „which structure our general understanding of the world and establish those presuppositions of the world that because, for example, they are based on our moral and political principles, are plain and simply felt to be ‘true’” (Wehling 2016, 73).<sup>2</sup>

Illustration 1 shows how these forms of persuasion work in principle: Just below the level of consciousness, i.e. in the area of passive intuition (described as „system 1“ by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahnemann), certain persuasion mechanisms seek to restructure that common sense reasoning with which

people normally think without doing so consciously. Here connections to objective thought (named „system 2“ according to Kahneman) significantly lessen. In addition, through subtle restructuring, economic thinking becomes embedded within a cognitive network extending into the depths of fundamental world views, emotions and values without making explicit these deep seated modifications to the very structure of thought, which are difficult to reverse.

Table 1 provides an overview of examples of persuasion identified by this study. In general, the identified forms of persuasion facilitate the market concept to become embedded in ideological and political interpretation frameworks, specifically termed frames. In addition, they establish and reinforce cognitive connections between abstract and semantically depleted economic concepts (e.g. the market, supply and demand, etc.) with mechanistic concepts on the one hand, while on the other engendering the automatic, unalterable, even compulsive nature of a situation. Consequently, abstract economic thinking is tied to experiences which are actually alien to the sphere of economics itself.

**Manipulation**

Manipulation is present when persuasion is applied in a concealed and purposeful manner. Employing insights gained from the cognitive sciences as well as propaganda research to standard economic textbooks, it becomes apparent how much



**TAB. 1**  
**Forms of Persuasion**

<b>Forms of Persuasion</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples (from Samuelson/Nordhaus and Mankiw)</b>
<b>Selective Framing</b>	(Continuous) emphasis of certain facts of knowledge and experience without substantiation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unreflected focus on price development through the exchange of goods.</li> <li>• A priori focus on the market economy.</li> </ul>
<b>Ideological and Political Framing</b>	Subliminal interlinking of economic concepts with political, ideological or moral values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black and White Fallacy: Establishing either-or dualisms, e.g. "market, freedom, democracy" vs. "centralized government, the state and communism".</li> <li>• Glittering Generalities: blanket identification of „the market“ with voluntary trade, democracy and prosperity.</li> <li>• Demonization: Use of pejorative terms such as "coercion", "verge of starvation" and "moral terror".</li> </ul>
<b>Appeals to Authority</b>	Encouragement of unreflected agreement through (unjustified) reference to standards, general principles, authorities, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeal to invisible mechanisms or processes on principle of faith alone (e.g. "the invisible hand").</li> <li>• Appeal to the "scientific objectivity" of economics without providing explicit training in it.</li> <li>• Appeal to famous economist without going into greater detail into their ideas using simple affirmations such as "the first", "most famous" or "brilliant".</li> </ul>
<b>Concealment</b>	Creating hypocognition (quasi a cognitive vacuum), i.e. "the non-existence or loss of ideas through a lack of linguistic representation".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No explication on the premises for mathematical-objective thought, no explanations of cultural historical contexts.</li> <li>• Disregard of social economic contexts.</li> <li>• Missing empirical proof of claims (instead establishment of plausibility by means of everyday examples).</li> </ul>
<b>Metaphorical Mapping</b>	By and large imperceptible structuring of thought through the use of unreflected metaphors: the use of metaphors to „cognitively couple“ concrete world experience with abstract ideas."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The market" as "machine", "mechanism", etc.</li> <li>• "The market" or "markets" as machine-like subjects.</li> <li>• Association of economic „laws“ with basic experiences such as the law of gravity or spatial orientations (through market diagrams in particular).</li> </ul>

these books exploit students' weakness regarding their ability to critically reflect upon the subject matter. The forms of persuasion outlined here operate on the level of the unconscious: They are capable of changing deep seated assumptions of self and the world, of political as well as moral principles without students becoming aware of the transformation of their own subjectivity. These forms consequentially meet the criteria of (attempted) concealed manipulation. Answering the question whether the manipulation is intentional and purposeful has turned out to be far more complex. This study shows that within neoliberalism a discourse exists which follows a generalized orientation towards transforming deep seated subjective assumptions. However, more detailed analysis is needed to show how this particular orientation has directly impacted the production and permanent modification of standard economic textbooks.

**Demarcation from neoclassical theory**

Often the suspicion that standard economics teaching entails indoctrination is discussed in the context of its proximity to neo-classical theory. If one were to view this theory within its historical appearance as a theoretical movement adhering to the ideal of objective science (which developed from the mid-19th century modelled on the pure physical-mathematical sciences), it becomes apparent that, from an epistemological point of view, it bears little resemblance to the forms of persuasion mentioned above (cf. Illustration 1): Neoclassical theory demands that economists seek objective knowledge independent of experience, completely devoid of subjectivity (whether personal or cultural) and exclusively focused on knowledge within purely formal, abstract structures. Knowledge, therefore, is the result of conscious and primarily mathematical



processes of thought which demand a high degree of control and ability with regard to one's reasoning faculties. They do not demand, however, the unconscious transformation of personal identity.

Consequently, the identified instruments of persuasion in standard economic textbooks cannot be justified by the (tacit) claim that these are necessary to impart objective scholarship. On the contrary, this blatantly deviates from the exigencies of academic education. Yet it also becomes apparent that neo-classical theory, in its prescribed detachment from human experience, can contribute little to elucidating the implementation of persuasion techniques in economics education. What this situation calls for are ways of knowledge acquisition in which objective detachment is systematically reduced while at the same time raising what is subconsciously known in the field of conscious reflection.

### Outlook

The study takes a deliberately exemplary approach, allowing readers to understand in detail and analyze in depth the forms of persuasion that have been implemented. As a result, it establishes the bases for readers to independently detect further and similar forms in other learning and teaching materials, thereby providing the ability to form their own opinion on this issue.

Prospectively it is necessary to undertake further exemplary analyses and overview studies not only with respect to standard university textbooks but also teaching materials at schools, so that (self-)education on this issue is expanded and reinforced. A preliminary inspection and assessment of secondary school material has shown that these, too, may be affected. A further task involves developing and establishing forms of economic education that go beyond experience-dependent, subconscious persuasion on the one hand and the experience-independent scientific ideal of absolute scientific objectivity on the other. This form of plurality in knowledge acquisition will become essential to universities and schools equally.

### Comments

**1** - Translated by the author. The original reads: „Wann immer unser Gehirn Worte und Ideen verarbeitet, aktiviert es dazu Wissen und Sinnzusammenhänge aus vorangegangenen Erfahrungen mit der Welt“ (Wehling 2016, 21).

**2** - Translated by the author. The original reads: „die unser generelles Verständnis von der Welt strukturieren [und] unsere Annahmen von der Welt zum Beispiel auf Grund unserer moralischen und politischen Prinzipien, die für uns schlicht ‚wahr‘ sind“ (Wehling 2016, 73).

### References

**1** - Kahneman, Daniel (2012): Thinking, Fast and Slow. London et al: Penguin.

**2** - Meyer, Jan/Land, Ray (2005): Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge. In: Higher Education 49, No. 3, 373-388.

**3** - Wehling, Elisabeth (2016): Politisches Framing. Wie eine Nation sich ihr Denken einredet – und daraus Politik macht, Magdeburg: Herbert von Halem.

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