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“Tricking the Sails” of Post-World War One Public Opinion: John Maynard Keynes and *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*

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***The Economic Consequences of the Peace* has a claim to be regarded as Keynes’s best book. In none of his others did he succeed so well in bringing all his gifts to bear on the subject in hand. Although the heart of the book was a lucid account of the reparation problem, the book was no mere technical treatise. [i]**

Thinking about John Maynard Keynes in terms of the trickster reveals the strength behind his influence in 20th century international relations and economics. While for a large portion of his life he was not in a position to affect direct change in British policy, his role as author, advisor and educator gave Keynes a significant indirect influence on public opinion as well as governmental policy. There can be little doubt that Keynes’ polemic *Economic Consequences of the Peace* [ii] carried a serious and dire message to the people of war-torn Europe that the Treaty of Versailles held little hope for lasting European peace. However, a common perception of Keynes as stoic intellectual might overlook a playful yet powerful rhetoric present in his writing. Keynes’ literary approach to the problems presented by the Great War and its aftermath lent greater force to his message. As an example of Keynes’ literary trickery the following essay takes a brief look at his treatment of British Prime Minister Lloyd George within a context of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* and immediate post-WWI British public opinion.

In 1919, less than one year after the Armistice was signed ending hostilities in World War One, John Maynard Keynes was the chief British representative on the Supreme Economic Council during the talks preceding the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Keynes had enormous authority to deal with economic elements of the treaty on behalf of the British Prime Minister. However, when Keynes realized that his efforts to guide the formation of economic policies were for various reasons ineffective he resigned his position in the British government and returned to England. In his *Life of John Maynard Keynes*, Roy Harrod wrote that “Keynes felt a personal obligation . . . to do something at once towards rectifying the situation.” [iii] Harrod also wrote that: “It was deep anguish of soul that urged him to write [*The Economic Consequences of the Peace*] . . . He did not hesitate to flout the mighty and to outrage prevailing opinion. He sought to change that opinion.” [iv] Keynes, a Cambridge economist and prominent member of the Bloomsbury Group, wrote his account of events taking place at the Paris Peace Conference and in December 1919,

The Economic Consequences of the Peace was published.

Keynes faced a difficult task. Not only did he have to counter an economic element in prevailing British public opinion that Germany could pay the full cost of the war, he had to overcome a moral element in the rhetoric supporting Prime Minister Lloyd George's mandate. Since his direct attempts to steer the formation of the Treaty of Versailles toward what he felt were reasonable demands had failed, Keynes chose a more indirect method; he tried to take the wind out of the Treaty's potential success by "tricking the sails" of public opinion that gave Lloyd George and his government a popular mandate. In Stracheyesque style Keynes attacked Lloyd George, the embodiment of British public opinion, to focus British moral outrage away from the Kaiser. In this way Keynes could trick the British public into changing their stance on the economic issues of the Treaty without directly attacking the moral element in post-war British public opinion.

To understand Keynes' approach to this issue it is important to understand where public opinion and politics stood at the end of the Great War. The end of WWI in November of 1918 brought to British Prime Minister Lloyd George's coalition government of a level of insecurity. Although they had been the government that won the war, Lloyd George felt that attacks from both the political left and right might weaken his coalition government. In an effort to preserve political unity he called for a general election hoping that the government's success at bringing about an end to the war would help carry it through an election. Lloyd George wanted a public mandate when he went to the Paris Peace Conference and he reflected on the need for such a mandate in his memoirs. "Should hostilities suddenly terminate, it would be necessary to consult the country as to the line to be taken in making peace." [v] By having an election immediately after declaration of the armistice Lloyd George could take advantage of public sentiment and receive that mandate.

One of the key elements in the election of 1918 was the recent change in composition of the enfranchised public. The British Reform Bill passed in early 1918 altered the composition of the voting public in such a way that candidates seeking election had to face the issue of indemnities from Germany. Huge numbers of male soldiers and sailors serving overseas were given the opportunity to vote, women were partially enfranchised both directly, because some women gained the right to vote for themselves, and indirectly since some gained the right to vote for their husbands through the proxy vote. Parents and other relatives were also allowed to serve as proxies for soldiers and sailors. All these people were exposed to wartime moral rhetoric supporting the increases in pensions and disability benefits for soldiers through the newspapers and other means. The resulting influence of so many people concerned for the future welfare of the soldiers, their families and the resultant burden on the taxpayers, meant that in order to get elected and proceed to the formation of the Treaty of Versailles, Lloyd George had to adopt a campaign platform that demanded indemnities for the total cost of the war from Germany. To gain a public mandate for his policies at the peace conferences in Paris Lloyd George and others desiring to be elected had to work within a moral context to get elected. The build-up of public sentiment toward the plight of returning soldiers forced potential MPs to

take a moral stance that was directly connected to reparation economics. It is unlikely that had anyone else been elected and named Prime Minister they would have been able to do so without conceding to public demands for the total costs of the war. In any case, public sentiment for soldiers, sailors and their families developed over the period from 1916 to 1918 and held sway in the election and subsequently, through the elected government, at the Paris Peace Conference.

In printed speeches the London Times provided evidence that Lloyd George was responding to public opinion rather than what might have been his own misguided beliefs. Over the course of a few weeks Lloyd George's campaign rhetoric changed dramatically to account for demands of full indemnities. John Maynard Keynes outlined this change in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. "In his speech at Wolverhampton on the eve of the Dissolution (November 24) there is no word of Reparation or Indemnity. . . But a few days later at Newcastle (November 29) the Prime Minister was warming to his work: "When Germany defeated France she made France pay. That is the principle which she herself has established .and that is the principle we should proceed upon—that Germany must pay the costs of the war up to the limit of her capacity to do so" [vi] These statements however, were still too vague for a British public who wanted Germany to pay for the total costs of the war. The people wanted more concrete assurances that Germany would be held fully accountable. Even in the early part of December 1918, Lloyd George had still not said enough to gain public support. On December 8, the London Times wrote that "The public mind was still bewildered by the Prime Minister's various statements." [vii] Lloyd George had a vague approach to the issue of reparations which meant that, according to the Times, he was at risk of losing public support: "It is the candidate who deals with the issues of to-day who adopts Mr. Barne's phrase about 'hanging the Kaiser' and plumps for the payment of the cost of the war by Germany, who rouses his audience and strikes the notes to which they are most responsive." [viii] Three days later the Prime Minister issued a manifesto of six points that outlined his changed political stance on the issue of reparation.

1. Trial of the Kaiser.
2. Punishment of those responsible for atrocities.
3. Fullest indemnities from Germany.
4. Britain for the British, socially and industrially.
5. Rehabilitation of those broken in the war.
6. A happier country for all. [ix]

Expanding on these issues later in the day at Bristol, Lloyd George outlined three principles that would guide his indemnity policy: "First, we have an absolute right to demand the whole cost of the war; second, we propose to demand the whole cost of the war; and third, a Committee appointed by direction of the Cabinet believe that it can be done." [x] Thus it was that, at least according to Keynes, "The ordinary voter was led to believe that Germany could certainly be made to pay the greater part, if not the whole cost of the war. Those whose practical and selfish fears for the future the

Trickster's Way Vol 2

expenses of the war had aroused, and those whose emotions its horrors had disordered, were both provided for. A vote for a Coalition candidate meant the Crucifixion of Anti-Christ and the assumption by Germany of the British National Debt.”^[xi] Four days later Lloyd George’s coalition government won the election. Although one may fault him for playing to the crowd, Lloyd George was merely responding to a sentiment that was already developed in the British public. The existence of such sentiment at the end of the war meant members of the peace commission that worked on the Treaty had their hands tied. One of the primary U.S. delegates to the Paris conference, Colonel House said that “By arousing popular emotion during the war, an orthodox belligerent measure, they had created a Frankenstein monster which now held them helpless.”^[xii]

To undermine British confidence in the Treaty Keynes developed an intricate relationship between the three major negotiators, Lloyd George, French Prime Minister Clemenceau and American President Wilson. Keynes portrayed Clemenceau as the French embodiment of revenge for German aggressions in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. Keynes portrayed President Wilson as politically inept yet a prophet of a new age in international relations. Keynes used Lloyd George’s actions to set him up as a devious, opportunistic villain who took advantage of President Wilson and swayed him away from a morally righteous position to the side of Clemenceau’s immoral revenge. Keynes illustrated how Lloyd George “bamboozled” President Wilson into accepting Clemenceau’s point of view and how he subsequently, toward the end of the conference, tried to change Wilson’s mind and found out that “it was harder to de-bamboozle this old Presbyterian than it had been to bamboozle him. . .”^[xiii] By establishing these relationships Keynes provided the British public with a way to change their political position without necessarily seeming to be immoral with respect to making the Kaiser pay or inconsiderate of veterans’ needs. The turnabout in Lloyd George’s position concerning indemnities reinforced Keynes’s suggestion that the Prime Minister’s political maneuvering was devious and underhanded. Keynes could bring about public indignation for Lloyd George’s actions by setting him up as an immoral opportunist and switch British public focus from a desire to support their veterans to the need to avoid being collectively vilified in the world political arena through a connection with Lloyd George. This rhetorical strategy meant that Keynes was trying to get the British public to disown the embodiment of their own political will and thus make ineffectual the economic elements of the treaty they had staunchly demanded in 1918.

Although judging Keynes’ direct influence on the British public would involve a much more detailed study than is possible in a short article, one might hint at a potential influence on public opinion by establishing the popularity of the book. Public response to *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* was astounding. An international best seller, the book sold 60,000 copies in the first two months, 100,000 copies in the first six months and was translated into fourteen languages. Using critical reviews to gauge intellectual responses presents a most striking observation; virtually all reviews mentioned the biographical sketches that Keynes used to attack public opinion and some reviews attributed the book’s popularity directly to these sketches. Clyde King of the University of Pennsylvania wrote that *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* “has attracted world-wide attention because of its

analysis of Germany's ability to pay and because of its descriptions of the main features and the main actors in the world's greatest drama: the Peace Conference."^[xiv] Another reviewer expressed a suspicion that "the popularity of his book is due less to his somber picture of the economic condition of Europe in 1919 or serious discussion of remedial measures than to the agreeably acid and pointedly intimate portraits..."^[xv] Charles Seymour wrote that "it is the chapter on "The Conference," with its vivid and largely imaginative characterization of the Council of Four, which has caught the attention of the public and chiefly accounts for the wide sale of the book."^[xvi] Other reactions attested to the potentially long-standing influence of the biographical sketches: "Mr. Keynes' picture of the Four in action will not be forgotten so long as the Congress of Paris is remembered."^[xvii] An article in *The World Tomorrow* added that "History, we believe, will accept as authoritative Mr. Keynes' brilliant picture of the Peace Conference and the leading actors in it."^[xviii] Probably the most positive review was recorded in *The Bookman*:

Non-financial and non-economic readers are finding their chief pleasure in the amazingly outspoken portraits of the so-called "Big Four", and these, if vitriolic, have a brilliance that not many men could out-do.

Few writers could have bettered the portraits of President Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau. They have all the sharpness of the brilliant sketch, and, what is more, a suggestive quality which enables even those who have not been at all behind the scenes, to visualize the men who took part in the conference. I speak here entirely as a professional writer, and not at all as a politician.^[xix]

Although these reviews do not suggest Keynes' success at developing a direct influence upon public opinion they do establish the potential for such influence. This potential is further strengthened if one considers the expanding British middle class and increased political role of women; precisely the people who would be most effected by the terms of the Treaty. Success in averting future war would, as Keynes pointed out, mean more secure and prolific international trade and a reduced need for men to leave their homes and die in battle. Perhaps, for this venue, the results of Keynes' efforts are less significant than his method. What this brief look at *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* and the resulting reviews illustrates is that Keynes used narrative methods (the caricatures primarily) in his attempt to bring about international political and economic change. Since it was obvious to him that he could neither steer the juggernaut of Europe's economic will himself nor suggest a different way to navigate the swells of international political rivalry, Keynes the trickster chose to "trick the sails" of public opinion in his attempt to bring peace to Europe.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

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Notes

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- [i] Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed 1883-1920*. London: Macmillan London Limited, 1992 (1983)
- [ii] John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920
- [iii] R. F. Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1951 p. 260-261
- [iv] Ibid. p. 254
- [v] David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs: Volume II Part I*. Safety Harbor, Florida: Simon Publications, 2001 p. 1165
- [vi] John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920 p. 139-140
- [vii] Ibid. p. 142
- [viii] Ibid.
- [ix] Ibid. p. 143
- [x] Ibid. p. 144
- [xi] Ibid.
- [xii] H. Nicholson, *Peacemaking 1919*. London: Peter Smith, 1984 p. 87
- [xiii] Ibid. p. 54-55

Trickster's Way Vol 2

[xiv] Clyde L. King *Annals of American Academics*, v90, 1920 p.173

[xv] Review, *A. F. P. History*, v5 1920 p. 188

[xvi] Charles Seymour, "A Great Opportunity Missed" *The Yale Review* v9 July 1920 p. 857

[xvii] Walter Richard Eaton, "The Tragedy of Paris" *Freeman*, v1 March 17, 1920 p. 18

[xviii] Review, *The World Tomorrow*, v3 March, 1920 p. 94

[xix] Review ...p152 (exact reference forthcoming)