Pound And Politics

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Abstract

The paper presents a sympathetic understanding rather than a carping analysis of Pound's politics which were as real as his poetry. For it is through understanding not analysis that Pound's largely volitional and intuitional politics yield their full significance.

The significance of Pound's politics lay with the simplicity, sincerity and symmetry of his mainly economic convictions. These convictions goaded him into action and his politics became wedded to even desperate and adventurous deeds which exposed him to dangers. But these dangers did not deter Pound from pursuing his determinations till the very end of his life. As a man of "compulsive single-mindedness", Pound did not play possum like Eliot nor did he choose to vacillate like Yeats. In politics as in poetry Pound held certain convictions and did not give them up for fear of consequences. This distinguishes Pound's politics from Yeats's and Eliot's politics as well as defines Pound's attitude towards Mussolini and Hitler.
Pound who as poet earned Eliot’s encomium of “il miglior fabbro” did distinguish himself as a verteran politician. His politics were as significant and substantial as his poetry. As “ideas in action”(1) Pound’s politics even gained ascendency over his poetry. Still it is Pound’s poetry, not politics, that has attracted the lion’s share of attention. This is evidence of a step-motherly treatment being meted out to Pound’s politics. For Pound’s politics have been examined casually and that too with a bias to his poetry, resulting inevitably in a series of inadequate studies. To some scholars Pound’s politics appear, like Eliot’s politics, as a “bundle of contradictions”(2), a “theorizing upon theories”(3) or the zest of a “zany”(4). To others they seem, like Yeats’s politics, to be all vision: “vision fugitive” (Davis, 1968), “Lucid vision of civilization on purged of usury”(5), and “trigonometry of vision”(6). True. Pound was a theorizer and his theorizing, though naive, played a part in his action-oriented politics. Similarly, Pound was a visionary and his vision, though cranky, proved crucial to his politics. But it was neither vision nor Theorizing that made the essence of Pound’s politics. The essence of Pound’s politics was made, and this is the main theme of the present study, by the clarity, consistency and combative ness of his convictions, almost entirely economic. Whether in politics or in poetry Pound lived by certain convictions, no matter what the consequences. These convictions were largely innate and intuitive, changing little over the years with “influences”.

The signs of Pound’s politics were visible in early childhood(7) when he saw politics as money rather than as metaphysics. In truth, metaphysics never appealed to him and he always dismissed it as a “smoke-screen” (Chace, 1973: 29). To him politics meant good government which in turn meant sound economy. As a matter of fact, in Pound’s ideal universe good government and sound economy went together to further the cause of healthy art. Small wonder, then, that Pound “ran wild after economics (Kenner, 1965: 51)” and money—the mystical maker of all art and civilization. The maker of art is not talent but money, especially its sane and steady supply strictly under State supervision. Pound’s “Patria Mia” elaborates this view as early as 1912 by describing America as a country of cultural deficits and by diagnosing it as part of a Jewish conspiracy: “Art was lifted into Alexandria by subsidy, and by no other means will it be established in the United States” (Pound, 1912: 52-53).

These views of Pound’s which eventually hardened as diehard convictions were certainly reinforced as a result of his reading some sources and meeting some personalities. A chief source was Alexander Del Mar whose A History of Monetary Systems (New York, 1903) and A History of Money in Ancient Countries (London, 1885) contained similar ideas. By profession a mining engineer and director of the U.S. Treasury Bureau of Statistics, Del Mar discovered a discrepancy between the actual cost of production and the real value of circulation of gold and silver. This led him to intense speculations over the nature and function of money. Some of these speculations surfaced in Del Mar’s famous San Francisco lecture called Usury and the Jews (1897), and struck a sympathetic chord in the heart of Pound who was more or less a kindred soul. Obviously, Pound read Del Mar avidly and used him profitably in Usura Cantos as well as in Canto 97.

Another reinforcement that came handy to Pound as regards the strengthening of his fiscal opinions was provided by his 1918 meeting with Major C.H. Douglas. An engineer turned an economist, Douglas shared Pound’s passion for economic re-
form. By expounding his theory of false credit (or A-Plus-B Theorem) Douglas denounced, in a manner reminiscent of Del Mar and much to Pound’s delight, the usurious tendencies of Jews. In terms of this theory, the price of a commodity is always the sum of its wages (A) and production costs (B). If the price exceeds, as it does in real practice, it is because of the conspiracies of Jews and the manipulations of money-lenders. Basically being profit-minded, the Jews and the money-lenders who to Pound seemed the same breed create a situation in which everybody particularly the artist is made to lose his buying capacities. This results in dismal living conditions of the artists and its logical sequence the deterioration of art or civilization. An economic thesis as naïve as this which drew up a connection between ‘starving artists’ and ‘thriving bankers’ with the sole aim of blaming the latter, was sure to charm Pound who felt identically. But as rudiments of a tangible and true political philosophy which Pound so much desired this was quite precarious. Pound who prized honest thinking in economics was, nevertheless, persistent in his praise for Douglas, an epitomizer of such thinking almost in its entirety.

Douglas’s doctrine of social credit as adumbrated in his *Economic Democracy* (1920) proved a great boost to Pound’s own innate and intuitive thinking. In fact it confirmed and sharpened Pound’s economic perceptions. It also encouraged him to consider the problems of credit and currency in close relation to creativity. But the doctrine was dominantly theoretical and Pound was immensely practical. In line with his political predilections Pound therefore preferred a strong autocratic rule which could ensure economic freedom and artistic boom by curbing fiscal chaos. When Mussolini marched on Rome in October 1922, Pound felt, and again intuitively, that such rule has potentially if not really begun. And the various steps that Mussolini took immediately after taking over as ruler of Italy towards the improvement of common life enhanced Pound’s estimate of Mussolini as a benevolent dictator. Pound catalogues these steps in Canto 41, calling Mussolini, “the Boss”:

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“Having drained off the muck by Vada
From the marshes, by Circeo, where none else wd have drained it.
waited 2000 years, ate grain from the marshes;
water supply for ten million, another one million “vani”
that is rooms for people to live in”.

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Finding such achievements impressive enough, Pound naturally becomes a singer of Mussolini’s praises and an admirer of his action-oriented politics. In a letter of 30 November 1926 to Harriet Monroe Pound openly expresses his admiration for Mussolini:

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“I personally think extremely well of Mussolini
If one compares him to American Presidents, (the last three) or British Premiers, etc. in fact one can NOT without insulting him. If the intelligentsia do not think well of him, it is because they know nothing about ‘the state’, and government, and have no particularly large sense of values”.

(Rachewiltz, 1971: 125).

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Soon this admiration turns into life-long adoration and adds new clarity, consist-
ency and combativeness to Pound's already compact and coherent conviction-based politics\(^\text{(10)}\).

Pound's meeting with Mussolini at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome in January 1933, like his 1918 meeting with Douglas in the New Age office, proved both confirmatory and catalytic. It confirmed Pound's belief that Mussolini was a super leader and his fascism an ideal solution for the political problems afflicting humanity. It quickened the pace of Pound's political engagement and activism. Pound now embarks upon a new phase of political propaganda and ideological warfare by producing works like ABC of Economics (1933), 'Murder by Capital' (July 1933) and Jefferson, and/or Mussolini (1935). As these titles indicate, Pound as a politician has fully matured, able to articulate the convictions of his politics with confidence and willing to defend his sense of values with courage.

The main burden of these works is, as expected enough, a re-assertion of Pound's pet political and economic convictions-convictions which being similar never appear separately. It is a measure of Pound's consistency that he expounds the same theme again and again, viz credit, currency and creativity, and in a plausible manner. Thus in ABC of Economics he opines that reducing and evenly distributing working hours, "counting money as certificate of work done" (Pound, 1933: 41), and adopting "fairness in the issuance of certificates" (Pound, 1933: 51) are quite essential for the release of artistic energies which remain cramped under Jewish capitalism. Pound, as a matter of fact, never ceased seeing capitalism as the main culprit in his scheme of things since it smothers art by keeping artists hungry and unemployed. The same theme recurs in 'Murder by Capital' where Pound relishes to recount the horrors of capitalism. As regards remedies, Pound recommends, as usual, Douglas, the theoretical counterpart of Mussolini. For with his "various (relevant) plans" (Pound, 1933: 51) Douglas was the first economist to suggest and believe that "a better economic system would release more energy for invention and design" (Pound, July 1933: 592).

Pound's concern with a better economic system led him to discover an affinity between Mussolini and Jefferson whose regimes were absolutely free from "maladministration of credit" (Pound, July 1933: 588) - the root of all economic evils. In Jefferson and/or Mussolini Pound overstates this affinity, calling Jefferson an American Mussolini and Mussolini an Italian Jefferson. To Pound, Jefferson was an American genius who loved land, hated machinery and saw "the pockets of the people" as "the best place for keeping money\(^\text{(11)}\). Similarly, Mussolini was another genius of Italian fascism who ordered draining of marshy lands (to boost agriculture) and reduction of working hours rather than working hands (to avoid unemployment). They were, above all, men of action with strong allergy to abstractions. And it was this rather than anything else that made them geniuses according to Pound who was himself an ardent activist.

Pound's insistence upon money as the absolute maker of art, civilization and culture continued all through his writings (confirming the consistency and constancy of his convictions). Thus economics and economic themes reverberate through Pound's Eleven New Cantos (31-41) and numerous other writings that he authored.
during 1933-34. And the same is true of Social credit: An Impact (1935), Cantos 45,46 (1936) and Guide to Kulchur (1938). Here as elsewhere Pound harps upon the same tune i.e. Douglas, Mussolini, economic reform and artistic boom. Significantly enough, Canto 45 appeared in a journal of monetary reform not of poetry and contained “a chant against usury”\(^{12}\). To quote canto 45:

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"With Usura
With usura hath no man a house of good stone
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that design might cover their face,

with usura the line grows thick
with usura is no clear demarcation

Usura rusteth the chisel
It rusteth the craft and the craftsman
It gnaweth the thread in the loom

Usura slayeth the child in the womb
It slayeth the young man's courting
It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth
between the young bride and her bridegroom

CONTRA NATURAM"
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If great poetry resides in stark simplicity of words and naked sincerity of thought, then this is great poetry. One might even call it “an accepted master work of modernism” despite its being “so utterly archaic in its diction and cadence and so entirely dogmatic and moral in intention” (Alexander, 1979:178). In effecting a marriage between incantation and illumination Pound here has achieved a feat and produced what he himself considered an “adjunct to the Muses’ diadem”. Of course Pound is harnessing poetry to the uses of politics and this might be construed as desecration of pure poetry. But the matter of fact is that here as elsewhere Pound wanted to demonstrate that his politics were dead serious and never the Zest of a Zany. When it came to delineate his political principles Pound did not discriminate between prose and poetry. As seen above Pound’s political and economic convictions were so strong and spontaneous that they burst out through his prose and poetry alike with equal force. Being an inveterate political animal Pound in fact smelt and breathed and preached politics every where. To him there was no contradiction between pure poetry and prosaic politics.

Pound’s chant against usury which dominates Cantos 45-46 and 51 is heard quite loud and clear even in his Guide to Kulchur, apparently a treatise on culture. Often seen as a Poundian version of Eliot’s Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948), the work focusses upon money, economics and usury, and not upon culture. (This is least surprising since Pound’s culture never grew in isolation from
economic factors). Asserting his economic convictions with clarity and confidence usually characteristic of him (e.g. "History that omits economics is mere bunk"; "The basis of a state is its economic justice"; "In our time, the curse is monetary illiteracy"; etc), Pound here openly declares usury as a kind of hell the wholesale destruction of which is an urgent aim of his politics:

"Until the power of hell which is usura, which is the power of hogging the harvest, is broken, that is to say, until clean economic conditions exist and the abundance is divided in just and adequate parts among all men......... no law giver will be able to cure the bone disease of society by bits of sticking plaster and paint". (Pound, 1938:156-57).

One notices here plenty of straight thinking, easy economics and practical politics all intertwined. As straight thinking informs Ezra’s easy economics, so easy economics defines Pound’s practical politics here as elsewhere. Since usury is the fountain head of all conceivable ills, it bears the main brunt of attack. The lines are again illuminating and repetitive, hammering Pound’s fixed and favourite ideas such as fair money supply and tight state control to smash the stranglehold of usurers. The repetition here is functional, reflecting Pound’s concentration upon the key issue rather than his craziness of mind (as often alleged), and adding effectively to the clarity, consistency and combativeness of his politics. Interestingly enough, here if anywhere Pound comes close to attaining something analogous to Yeatsian ‘unity of thought’ without sharing any of his predilections for the invisible ‘spiritual’ or occultism.

Pound’s interest in money (as the mystical maker of all art and civilization) and ‘mundane matters’ (a phrase that again affirms Pound’s antipathy to Yeats) dictates the theme and tone of his pamphlet ‘what is money for?’ (1939), Aply subtitled. A sane man’s guide to Economics, the pamphlet appears to be another exercise in straight thinking and another exhortation against usury. Pound sounds absolutely confident and categorical while reiterating his old view that sane politics and sound economy are synonymous:

"We will never see an end of ructions, we will never have a sane and steady administration until we gain an absolutely clear conception of money. I mean absolutely not an approximately clear conception". (Pound, 1939:2).

Apart from reiterating his old conviction, pound also offers an old definition of money. Money is thus a means of exchange, a ticket issued and controlled by State "for getting the country’s food and goods justly distributed". It is, in short, ‘a printed note’ meant to ensure the fair disposal of nature’s bounty. Pound held this view of
money to be absolutely 'right' and 'real' as it lay anathema to usury based on private profit and personal prosperity.

Pound’s intuitive perception (solidifying as conviction) that usury is in fact “the cancer of the world, which only the surgeon’s knife of Fascism can cut out of the life of the nations” (Pound, 1939:11), was enough to instigate him for his early embrace of Fascism as well as his wartime air broadcasts[15]. Between January 1941 and July 1943 Pound made as many as 125 Rome Radio broadcasts, always supporting and stressing his old themes viz money, Mussolini, Fascism and usury. “In economic matters, usury was heavily emphasized” (Doob, 1978: 417), and among political leaders. Mussolini (and to some extent Hitler too) was reverentially mentioned. This is proved by one of Pound’s various air speeches delivered on 31st May 1942:

"......... Hitler is also YOUR leader.
TWO basic texts were enounced in EUROPE,
ON the continent. Mussolini's, and it is
summed up in ........ "Discipline the
economic forces and equate them to the
needs of the nation".......... as Hitler put it in Main Kampf, there
was ONE ray of light in a world moving
toward sunset, and that was Mussolini's
regime in Italy'.......... if mussolini
stands for social justice, for breaking
the usurer's bondage, the Nazi revolution
was based on the BREED. Based on sane
breeding; and on that basis Germany rose
from her sepulchre". (Doob, 1978:154-155).

Despite his anti-occultism, Pound was at one with racist Yeats. Apart from hinting at it, the speech highlights, with characteristic cogency and clarity, pound’s actions and beliefs that he doggedly pursued over the years. One marvels at the simplicity, sincerity and seriousness of expression adding up to a demotic, dogmatic and determined assertion of Pound’s political convictions. Another such expression appears in another air broadcast given by Pound on 2nd May, 1943:

"I have in fact been trying for over 20 years
to get a little serious attention, persuade you
to direct a little serious attention to a few
serious subjects. Nature of money, and mode
of its issue, and usury". (Doob, 1978:292).

As his air speeches suggest, Pound loved preaching and persuasion as legitimate parts of his politics. He even “went at it with a flaming American zeal” Paige, 1982:XXII). But as his records (mostly revealed through his letters) show, he no less loved action and practice. Right from the beginning of his career, he supported only
those ideas which were practically sound and feasible. Thus his letter to Professor Felix Schelling of Pennsylvania University written in 1916 moots the idea of a "fellowship given for creative ability regardless of whether the man had any university degree whatsoever" (Paige, 1982:99). And another 1922 letter addressed to Kate Buss pleads for the establishment of a fund "Bel Esprit for Eliot" (Paige, 1982:175) to help destitute creative writers. Such instances give a lie to the notion that Pound's politics were amere 'theorizing upon theories' devoid of all practical content.

One may cite some more such instances to prove the practicality of Pound's politics. In late '30s Pound travelled to Worgl (Austria) to see for himself Gesell's theory of 'stamp scrip' in action(16). In 1934 he wrote to Salvador de Mada riaga, an old friend, requesting him to try Douglas's theories in the Cortes of the new Spanish republic. Again in October 1935 Pound submitted a plan at Mussolini's office for the replacement of the then League of Nations, and another in November 1939. And the clearest example of Pound's action-oriented politics was seen in 1939 when he made his first trip home since 1911 to approach Roosevelt for an advisory role for himself in American government. This was "not megalomania, but a sense of responsibility carried to extreme" (Rachewiltz, 1971:124), or a whole-hearted commitment to one's convictions. Though Roosevelt never received Pound and Pound never received any offer from the American government, Pound never lost confidence in his convictions. Even the ordeals of treason-charges (1943) and long imprisonments (1945-58) could not shake Pound's convictions. From first to last, he remained a man of action(17), one whose actions were in full harmony with his convictions. Such close correspondence between action and conviction (rare in Yeats and Eliot) accounts for the fearful symmetry (as well as frightening simplicity and fierce sincerity) of Pound's politics.

The main ingredients of Pound's politics are fairly clear by now. They are easy economics, straight thinking and combative convictions, all wedded to the cause of credit, currency and creativity (i.e. sane currency, sound credit and salubrious art prevailing in a society free from usury). All these ingredients, it may be noted, bear the mark of Pound's robust optimism, partly American and partly pagan. As an American, Pound inherited the American trait of optimism. And as a pagan Pound did not believe, as Yeats (cullingford, 1981:131) and Eliot did, in the dogma of original sin. Pound in fact optimistically believed in considerable human progress under proper economic conditions. This saves Pound's politics from Yeats's vacillation as well as Eliot's vagueness, and makes it truly and uniquely Poundian full of clarity, consistency and combativeness. Pound's politics were truly Poundian in the sense that they were based upon his intuitive perceptions in total disregard to the complexity of economic issues or the depravity of human nature. Intuitive perceptions led him to discover the main ingredients of his conviction-based politics, and to develop a fanaticism (another variant of fierce sincerity). Intuitive perceptions led him on the eve of his death, to consider AVARICE (Heymann, 1976:313) rather than USURY as the root of all evils. Pound in fact never mistrusted his intuitive perceptions which served him well on all occasions. The result was a kind of politics distinct from the common mold and difficult to judge by logic. This is not ageneralised but genuine assessment of Pound's politics made after sympathetic understanding of his fixed and fierce con-

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victions. As said in the Abstract of the paper, Pound's politics needed understanding not analysis for their proper evaluation.

Notes


2. When less sober, Stock succumbed to scepticism and dismissed Pound's politics as something insubstantial. See the same book, pp. 175-76.

3. Another attempt to deny Pound's politics its solidity and substance in the same book, p. 170.


8. Pound gives a detailed account of the Theorem in Canto 38.


11. See Ezra Pound, Jefferson and /or Mussolini (London: Stanley Nott Ltd, 1935), P. 80. Pound takes this remark to be a proof of Jefferson's anti-banking and antisemitic bias as well as a confirmation of his thesis that money be freely and sufficiently distributed among people to improve their purchasing power.

12. Pound's view of usury as a "sin against nature" remains the common theme of Cantos 45 and 51. Appropriately enough, the two Cantos are often lumped together and called usura Cantos. I have not quoted Canto 51 since in theme & technique it is much similar to Canto 45 just quoted.


14. Yeats's love for the invisible 'spiritual' was in marked contrast to Pound's aversion to abstractions. But Yeats's advice to hammer one's thoughts into Unity did appeal to Pound.

16. Silvio Gesell, "the South American monetary reformer, saw the danger of money being hoarded and proposed to deal with it by the issue of 'stamp scrip'. This should be a govt. note requiring the bearer to affix a stamp worth up to 10% of its face value on the first day of every month. Unless the note carries its proper complement of monthly stamps it is not valid". See Pound, What is money for? (West minster: U.K. Publications, 1939), p.7. Pound refers to Gesell also in Canto 74 and Guide to Kuchur (p.277 and p.173).

17. As late as September 1972, i.e. two months before his death, Pound re-affirmed his faith in action when he said to C. David Heymann: "The error is all in the not done". See C. David Heymann, Ezra Pound: The Last Rower (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), P.312.

Bibliography


