

# Grasping Reality with Both Hands

The weblog of Brad DeLong. Comments (mostly) welcome, or email me at [delong@hey.com](mailto:delong@hey.com) with "delong-weblog" as the subject.  
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## Against 'Ideology for Ideology's Sake'—Note to Self



Smart young whippersnapper and Equitable Growth alumnus Marshall Steinbaum attempts to solve the problem of corrupt interests and corrupt ideology with... MOAR IDEOLOGY! Ideology that he hopes, somehow, will be reality-based.

I do not think this will work:

**Marshall Steinbaum:** 'In order to know what to do <https://twitter.com/Noahpinion/status/1016333284320526337>, we have to know how things work. To me, the sentiment @Noahpinion expresses here is the moment I get off the 'empirical revolution' train, because this is where it turns toward 'maybe we can avoid ideology after all'. Nope..."

The occasion is **Noah Smith** over at Bloomberg News, who noted:

*Holy C—! This <https://equitablegrowth.org/brad-delong-worthy-reads-on-equitable-growth-june-29-july-5-2018/> is [uch an important point <https://twitter.com/Noahpinion/status/1016012399185293312>: Instead of thinking "what determines X", policy thinkers should always be thinking of "how can we change X". It seems forehead-smackingly obvious, and yet so often we still ignore the question of "WHAT CAN WE DO?!"*

"What are the determinants of poverty?" "What are the determinants of economic growth?" "What are the determinants of IQ?" NO! These are questions for scientists! For policy thinkers, it should be "What can we do to affect these things?" Many causes are beyond the control of policy. Many policies work for reasons we don't fully understand. Scientists' job is to figure out how to control the things we can't yet control, and understand the effects we don't yet understand. But that is not policy thinkers' job!

A great example is LEAD REMOVAL. We're getting good evidence that lead removal causes all sorts of good outcomes (e.g. lower crime, better school performance, etc.). Do we need to know what OTHER things might work even better, in order to do lead removal? NO! Just do it!!

Here is a GREAT simple succinct statement of the principle:

@SallyLHudson: As economist Arthur Goldberger put it, bad eyesight is genetic. That has no bearing on whether doctors should prescribe eyeglasses. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2553675.pdf>

Focusing on identifying the biggest causes of a problem often distracts us from asking how we can actually change the problem. It biases us toward policy paralysis.

It is certainly true that Noah and I both believe that equitable growth—raising, say, the geometric mean of real expenditure on people (not the average!) is a principal that is non-ideological in the sense that it either commands broad assent or it is such political death not to assent to it that those who disagree pretend that they do assent. From that perspective, what you need then is evidence, not ideology. And if you find that you must turn to ideology because the evidence is not sharp enough? I think it is fraught with disaster to do so. I think you then need to gather more evidence, and to argue with smart, honorable, honest people who think differently from you about what the evidence means.

And what if you do think that your ideology is a necessary input to understanding the evidence? That you possess a secret Key to History given to you by some revelation? Well, my view then is that—like all those who pretend to certain knowledge of Last and First Things, you are either a grifter or are mad, and it is going to end in tears. As my example, let me simply mention: Leon Trotsky.

Moreover, since I like it, let me add John Maynard Keynes's strictures on why Trotsky is not to be taken seriously:

**John Maynard Keynes** (1926): (1926): *Trotsky On England* [http://delong.typepad.com/egregious\\_moderation/2009/05/john-maynard-keynes-19826-trotsky-on-england.html](http://delong.typepad.com/egregious_moderation/2009/05/john-maynard-keynes-19826-trotsky-on-england.html): "The book is, first of all, an attack on the official leaders of the British Labour Party...

...Trotsky sees, what is probably true, that our Labour Party is the direct offspring of the Radical Non-conformists and the philanthropic bourgeois, without a tinge of atheism, blood, and revolution. Emotionally and intellectually, therefore, he finds them intensely unsympathetic....

The Fabians, the I.L.Pers, the Conservative bureaucrats of the trade unions represent at the moment the most counter-revolutionary force in Great Britain, and perhaps of all the world's development.... At any cost, these self-satisfied pedants, these gabbling eclectics, these sentimental careerists, these upstart liveried lackeys of the bourgeoisie, must be shown in their natural form to the workers. To reveal them as they are will mean their hopeless discrediting...

Well, that is how the gentlemen who so much alarm Mr. Winston Churchill strike the real article. And we must hope that the real article, having got it off his chest, feels better.... Trotsky is concerned in these passages with an attitude towards public affairs, not with ultimate aims. He is just exhibiting the temper of the band of brigand-statesmen to whom Action means War, and who are irritated to fury by the atmosphere of sweet reasonableness, of charity, tolerance, and mercy in which, though the wind whistles in the East or in the South, Mr. Baldwin and Lord Oxford and Mr. MacDonald smoke the pipe of peace.... If only it was so easy! If only one could accomplish by roaring.... The roaring occupies the first half of Trotsky's book.

The second half, which affords a summary exposition of his political philosophy, deserves a closer attention.... Granted his assumptions, much of Trotsky's argument is, I think, unanswerable.... But what are his assumptions? He assumes that the moral and intellectual problems of the transformation of Society have been already solved—that a plan exists, and that nothing remains except to put it into operation.... An understanding of the historical process, to which Trotsky is so fond of appealing, declares not for, but against, Force at this juncture of things. We lack more than usual a coherent scheme of progress, a tangible ideal. All the political parties alike have their origins in past ideas and not in new ideas—and none more conspicuously so than the Marxists. It is not necessary to debate the subtleties of what justifies a man in promoting his gospel by force; for no one has a gospel. The next move is with the head, and fists must wait.

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