

This is an archived version of the article: Angus Burgin, “Age of Certainty: Galbraith, Friedman, and the Public Life of Economic Ideas,” *History of Political Economy*, special volume on *The Economist as Public Intellectual*, ed. Tiago Mata and Steven G. Medema (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 191–219. For the version published in *History of Political Economy* with original pagination see <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-2310998>.

Age of Certainty: Galbraith, Friedman, and the Public Life of Economic Ideas

Angus Burgin

In the summer of 1973, while watching John Dean’s testimony in the Watergate trial at his vacation house in rural Vermont, John Kenneth Galbraith received an unexpected telephone call. On the other end of the line was Adrian Malone, a producer with the BBC who had become known for developing multipart historical documentaries of notable ambition and expense (Galbraith 1981c, 528). Most recently Malone had completed *The Ascent of Man*, a thirteen-part series on the history of science that had attracted glowing reviews and turned its central figure, Jacob Bronowski, into a household name. Malone was now shifting his attention to the history of the social sciences and commencing the project of presenting the subject’s notoriously abstract themes to a mass audience on the small screen. Malone informed Galbraith that he would be the ideal person to guide such an enterprise. The reasons for this choice, as a later proposal noted, were readily evident: Galbraith was “that rare being, a practical philosopher.” He was “an authority who stands outside, but is respected by those with political power,” benefited from “a worldwide reputation,” and maintained the capacity to “entertain ideas and experiments from both ends of any spectrum, radical or reactionary.”

Correspondence may be addressed to Angus Burgin, Johns Hopkins University, Department of History, 3400 North Charles Street, 338F Gilman Hall, Baltimore MD 21218; e-mail: burgin@jhu.edu. I am grateful to Kelly Kelleher Richter and Paige Glotzer for their invaluable research assistance and to two anonymous readers for *History of Political Economy* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Galbraith transcended the conventional divisions between academia and politics, and between abstract debates in the social sciences and a mass audience. Malone, who was a vocal admirer of the eighteenth-century French philosopher, declared his chosen star a “modern Voltaire.”¹

For Galbraith, deciding how to respond to Malone’s offer was not easy. There were, of course, many reasons to find it appealing. Unlike many of his fellow economists, Galbraith was not known for his distaste for celebrity: as a frequently photographed confidante to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and a television presence on *Today*, *Firing Line*, and the political coverage on the network news, he had already become known in the popular press as a “resident pundit” and “house liberal” who was in danger of “overexposure” (Meyer 1977). Accusing his academic colleagues of confusing obscurity with rigor, Galbraith had instead directed his writings toward a mass public, and his many appearances on the best seller lists were a testament to his successes. He found television’s capacity to reach a still-broader audience alluring and may have seen some romantic appeal in the prospect of traveling the world as a television star. At the same time, accepting the offer would force him to leave Harvard only two years before he reached retirement age, which might imply an unwanted hint of bitterness at an economics department within which he had long been marginalized (Parker 2005, 517). He would need to teach himself an elaborate new medium at an age when he had expected to be spending more time in rural repose and skiing in Gstaad. And for a figure who had already achieved international literary renown, tackling such an unusual enterprise entailed some risk of appearing a fool. Colleagues who expressed skepticism of his mass-market books were likely to find television more dubious still. “It’s the instinctive reaction of writers—perhaps they feel threatened,” he later recalled. “The feeling is that if something is done in pictures, done visually, it’s inherently inferior than if it had been done in words, in print.”²

Flattered and intrigued by the opportunity, Galbraith decided to set aside his reservations and accept it. In doing so, he became the first economist to engage in an ambitious, long-form attempt to relay economic ideas to a popular audience via a visual medium. He was well aware that this challenge would not be easily met. Malone had been clear from the outset that television was a “blunt instrument,” requiring a simplified form of exposition that did not

¹ “APRE-OFFER,” box 567, folder “BBC program correspondence: BBC: early [1973],” John Kenneth Galbraith Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (hereafter cited as Galbraith Papers).

² Cecil Smith, “John Galbraith Feels Certain about Success of ‘Age of Uncertainty,’” Miami Herald TV Preview (undated), box 566, folder “BBC program: articles [general],” Galbraith Papers.

easily align with Galbraith's patrician persona and ironic sensibility (Parker 2005, 517). But Galbraith also knew that the discipline of economics, despite its reputation for tedious abstraction, had become a site of intense public interest and engagement. With the profession buoyed by the prestige of its new association with the Nobel Prize and made relevant by debates over inflation and stalled economic growth, the time seemed right for an economist to explain the discipline to those who sensed its importance but did not have the time or patience to learn much of it in books.

Galbraith was not the only one in his profession to sense the propitiousness of the moment and the potential of the medium. He commenced work on the documentary series that would become *The Age of Uncertainty* in an era when a growing number of corporations, advocacy organizations, and think tanks were engaging in concerted attempts to convince popular audiences of the merits of free market ideas. Sensitive to their own perceived marginalization, they observed the production process for Galbraith's incipient series with evident alarm. Seeking to discredit and displace his arguments, they turned to Milton Friedman, who had in recent years become Galbraith's most prominent opponent in the public sphere. Like Galbraith, Friedman demonstrated a facility for popular journalism and routinely embraced opportunities to influence public opinion on matters of political concern. Although the two men were neighbors in Vermont and referred to each other as friends, their distaste for each other's views had become evident in their frequent sparring sessions in columns and editorials. It was therefore no surprise that Friedman, at the request of colleagues at a think tank in London, met the release of *The Age of Uncertainty* with a public lecture that was intended to discredit its claims. And not long thereafter—at the urging of a public television executive who had been converted to his views—Friedman developed and released a competitive multipart documentary of his own, *Free to Choose*, which would (in conjunction with a companion volume) become the most popular and widely disseminated introduction to his ideas.

At this moment of unusually intense debate over economic policy, the most prominent public exemplars of left and right-wing economic views therefore found themselves engaged in competing attempts to reach a mass audience through the maturing medium of television. An exploration of their efforts helps address several crucial aspects of the popularization of economic ideas over the final decades of the twentieth century. Such efforts, it will become apparent, were deeply embedded in institutional structures that varied quite extensively for economists of differing views. Although writers of books rely on networks of colleagues, assistants, editors, and publishers, the act of

writing itself is often solitary, and social connections can be relegated to an ancillary or intermediary role. The apparent intimacy of television, by contrast, obscures the enormous administrative and technical complexity of the production process. Beginning in its earliest stages, a television documentary series requires substantial funding, specialized expertise, and the support of programming executives. Even the inceptions of Galbraith's and Friedman's series were not attributable to them: both were approached and propositioned by individuals within the industry who had become enchanted with their ideas. And the quality of the productions remained largely at the mercy of colleagues who possessed technical competencies that Galbraith and Friedman were not fully equipped to evaluate. This rapidly evolving media environment required institutions to play a thicker and more constitutive role than had been the case in a public sphere that depended primarily on literary production. The advocacy of economic ideas now involved much more than simply stating them.

The medium itself also posed a unique set of problems, which rewarded certain modes of presentation while rendering others ineffective. Print effaces the personal and allows for the construction of an identity that transcends physical appearance and comportment. Television is not so kind. Now, new details mattered: height, accent, inflection, eye contact, clothing, and spontaneity of exposition. Economists who appeared regularly on television became personalities, and their audiences came to see their self-presentations as deeply entwined with their representations of their ideas. But even as the medium made economists' personal traits more vivid, it had the capacity to render their ideas more turgid. Its format is unforgiving toward theory, jargon, or extended exposition. A discipline that functions by abstracting from the social accords at best uneasily with a medium that thrives on personalizing the abstract. Even those historians of economic thought who are most attuned to problems of transmission tend to focus on written exposition, but in this new era the personal instantiation and visual expression of economic ideas would play a crucial role in conditioning their reception.

To emphasize the importance of the visual is not to imply the insignificance of language. Here, as elsewhere, rhetoric mattered. Television producers are impatient with elaborate caveats and justifications, and seek to induce performers to arrive quickly at a compelling distillation of their ideas. The contrast between Galbraith's and Friedman's responses to this imperative was stark. In *The Age of Uncertainty*, Galbraith attempted to bring to television the ironic sensibility, attuned to paradox, that had long served him well in his literary productions. His elaborate contrasts and attempts at mordant humor

withered on the screen, and he found himself criticized by television audiences for the very academicism that he had long deplored. Friedman instead relied on a simple exposition of the market metaphor, rendering it tangible through carefully chosen human examples that appeared to validate his ideas. The rediscovery of the market unfolded, in part, as a plebiscite on these dueling representations of the economic world.

The eventual outcomes, of course, were lopsided: as Galbraith's public career continued its gradual eclipse, Friedman rapidly ascended to become the leading economic prophet of the final decades of the twentieth century. Galbraith may have labeled this the "age of uncertainty," but it would prove kindest to those economists who offered the absence thereof.

When Galbraith and Malone began work on *The Age of Uncertainty*, they were seeking to adapt an approach to long-form documentary that had been refined by the BBC in the previous half decade—in Kenneth Clark's pioneering history of art, *Civilisation* (1969); Alistair Cooke's history of the United States, *America* (1972); and Jacob Bronowski's history of scientific thought, *The Ascent of Man* (1973)—to new subject matter. These massively expensive and thematically rich series had taken advantage of the increasing prevalence of new technologies, including higher-band UHF signals and color (introduced by BBC2 in 1964 and 1967, respectively), to take on subjects of greater visual complexity and topical ambition than were conventionally associated with the medium (Briggs 1985, 360; Crisell 1997, 115, 117). Seeking to tie a broad and diffuse range of historical material together, the director Michael Gill had relied on jet travel in *Civilisation* to adopt a striking technique: a central narrator would simply materialize at the location under discussion, instantly traversing vast distances multiple times in a single show (Barnouw 1993, 315). Enormous time, effort, and resources were leveraged to develop programs that elided their necessity by projecting an impression of ease. The effect was miraculous, and audiences that had been habituated to the parochial television offerings of the time observed these expansive new productions with awe. The most cynical among them wondered why such ambitious cultural programming seemed always to originate from the BBC. As a review of *The Age of Uncertainty* in the January 19, 1977, issue of *Variety* observed, "Adult education as riveting entertainment is seemingly an English video patent." A critic in the *Washington Post* was less circumspect: series like *America* and *Civilisation*, he remarked, made one wonder why there was "so much idiocy on American TV" (Mitchell 1974).

Malone, as his colleague Geoff Haines-Stiles later recalled, was a man of “grandiose ambitions” who believed himself to be engaged in the development of a new cultural form: the “creative documentary,” a mode of presentation that was “just different from other forms of communication” and capable of achieving “some things that books can’t” (Dornfeld 1998, 44). At times this self-conception inspired Malone to drift into descriptive excess, as in his peculiar assertion in an offering sheet that if “Voltaire lived today he would want to do a thirteen part television series along the intellectual lines of *Candide*.” But television executives found his goal of doing “for social evolution what ‘*The Ascent of Man*’ did for cultural evolution” compelling, and Malone had little difficulty in convincing the BBC to provide primary support for his proposed \$2 million budget.³ Time-Life, which had cosponsored *The Ascent of Man*, proved more skeptical of the project, for reasons related to Galbraith’s political inclinations rather than the subject matter itself. As its executives observed to Malone, Galbraith would have difficulty finding underwriters for a series that would likely yield conclusions unpopular with corporate decision makers.⁴ PBS, however, saw the long-form documentary as a format that differentiated the still-nascent network from its commercial competitors and offered to contribute \$720,000 to the development of the series (Dornfeld 1998, 42; Kelley 1977). In conjunction with the \$300,000 contributed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and \$150,000 from the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, this ensured that the necessary funding had been raised.⁵ These resources would enable three years of work on the series, with a full production team assembling thirteen episodes out of scenes shot from locations around the world.

When the series finally appeared on English television in 1977, public expectations were high. In a sometimes lightweight popular culture, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* remarked that Galbraith was likely to serve as a new “‘heavy’ star” (“Figuring to Be a Star” 1977). The *Daily Mail* added that Galbraith would receive the “superstar treatment” in BBC2’s “prestige series of the year” (Rees 1977). Malone’s vision was still grander: he saw the series as one that should remain relevant for “at least ten to twenty years.”⁶

Galbraith therefore found himself “puzzled,” and a little dismayed, when

³ “APRE-OFFER,” Galbraith Papers.

⁴ Adrian Malone to John Kenneth Galbraith, December 14, 1973, box 567, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program correspondence: BBC: early [1973],” Galbraith Papers.

⁵ Graham Fraser, “Be Patient, Good Viewer, and Uncle Ken Will Make It All Make Sense” (publication and date unknown), box 581, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program reviews: Canadian,” Galbraith Papers.

⁶ “APRE-OFFER,” Galbraith Papers.

the initial reviews registered a response that ranged from tepid to scathing.⁷ Conservative publications lambasted Galbraith's perspective: the *Daily Telegraph* called the series a "hymn of hate," and the *Spectator* brushed it aside as a "banality" (Last 1977; Ingrams 1977). Other critics observed that Galbraith had failed to make a smooth transition from the written word to television: the *Crew Chronicle* preferred the book version of the series, flatly stating that it was "better in print," and the *Times* concluded that the only virtue of the programs was "as a commercial on behalf of" the transcripts serialized in the *Listener* ("TV Series Better in Print" 1977; Church 1977). One British reviewer noted that "little is left unshaken of Prof. Galbraith's reputation as a scholar, if not as a television personality."⁸ Witnessing the reception in England, the *New York Times* acerbically noted that the series was "not, in any case, the subject of dinner table banter" (Kilborn 1977). Although a few British critics expressed more favorable views of the series, it was difficult for those assessing the response to the series not to conclude with the *New York Times* that "this time" the BBC's "formula" had failed (O'Connor 1977).

There was no single reason for the series' perceived failure: as with many productions of this kind, its problems were complex and interrelated. They began, however, with Galbraith's attempt to address abstract social theories through a historical analysis. The series proceeded as a march through great thinkers, from Adam Smith and the classical economists through Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes up to contemporary times, providing Galbraith's abbreviated assessments of their theoretical contributions and the contexts in which they wrote. There was never any question that this would be the animating concept behind the series: its predecessors at the BBC had all structured their episodes around an advancing chronology, and Galbraith himself saw it as an opportunity to provide needed attention to an often-overlooked subject. "The history of economic thought has been a declining subject both in the universities and in the public eye," he told *Focus* magazine in 1976. "This will be something to revive interest" ("John Kenneth Galbraith" 1976). In a letter to the *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, he expressed optimism that the series would draw attention to issues that had long been neglected by economics departments that had become ever more narrowly focused on the problems of

⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith to Aubrey Singer, May 5, 1977, box 567, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: correspondence: BBC, July 1977–February 1976," Galbraith Papers.

⁸ Colin Welch, "The Rich Wot Gets the Blame," box 566, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program articles [general]," Galbraith Papers.

the present day.⁹

Galbraith, however, had risen to fame as an overtly partisan political economist, creating an awkward problem for his attempts to adopt a more distanced historicism. Malone addressed this by seeking to avoid any overt sense that the series was structured around the star's contemporary political views. "The feeling should be of objectivity, assuming no god-given truths," he wrote in an early outline.¹⁰ And Galbraith tried to adapt himself to this new role: as the series was released, he emphasized his detachment from contemporary politics and referred to himself as "essentially a middle-of-the-road figure" (Henry 1977a). But shortly after the first episodes were released, conservative commentators began expressing their dissatisfaction with perceived distortions of the historical record. Was not the treatment of Marx notably more charitable than those of his classical predecessors?¹¹ Why did Galbraith draw attention to the foibles of the capitalists that Thorstein Veblen criticized but not the obvious personal shortcomings of Veblen himself (Jewkes 1977)? Where could one find all the equations that might be expected in a history of economic thought (Minogue 1977)? And in the episodes exploring the economics of more recent times, why were the theories of Milton Friedman ignored?¹² As the "high priest of wage and price controls," a "fervent Democrat," and the house economist of the Kennedy family, it was difficult for many to see the series as anything other than a vehicle for Galbraith's well-known and distinctive economic views (Lyon 1976; Reed 1977). Perhaps in an attempt to acknowledge and defuse impressions of partiality, the series adopted the subtitle from the Bronowski series: "A Personal View." But the "problem" that many perceived, as *Newsweek* wrote, was that "the view is *highly* personal" (Ruby 1977, 61; emphasis added). The *Boston Globe* put it more bluntly: "Galbraith is not scholarly, not abstract, above all not objective" (Henry 1977b). Kenneth Minogue (1977, 1978), a market-oriented political theorist at the London School of Economics, excoriated the series as "trial by caricature" for which the operative principle was "distortion of the past for the purpose of flattering the present." In *The Age of Uncertainty*, Galbraith attempted to suppress his views in search of historical credibility that proved difficult for him to achieve.

⁹ John Kenneth Galbraith, "Note on 'The Age of Uncertainty' for the History of Economic Thought Newsletter," box 577, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: History of Economic Thought Newsletter, Spring 1977," Galbraith Papers.

¹⁰ Adrian Malone, series outline, box 577, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: outline," Galbraith Papers.

¹¹ Welch, "Rich Wot Gets the Blame."

¹² Galbraith responds to this question in a letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 1977, box 983, folder "Letters to the Editor: Wall Street Journal."

He therefore found himself trapped in a muddled space between the poles of advocacy and objectivity that had riven economics since its professionalization nearly a century before (Furner 1975). The foundational tension was evident in the choice of a title: this was a series that would draw its attention to “uncertainty,” or the instability of established theories and solutions, rather than posing its own. The grand narrative that Galbraith established was one of decline, as the theories of earlier political economists were swept aside in the wake of failed predictions and unexpected events. (In the halls of the BBC, the production became colloquially known as *The Descent of Man* [Rees 1977].) It was intended, as Galbraith noted in a contemporary interview, to reveal “how *sure* capitalists were of capitalism,” “how sure the socialists were of socialism,” how sure the European countries were of their dominant political position, and how sure the ruling classes of earlier generations were of the permanence of the social order. In exposing these fallacies, Galbraith hoped to draw attention to the conceptual instability of a postmodern age. He represented this as a great virtue of the series, which situated itself against those who “make the firmness of their avowal a substitute for the certainty of their position,” exchanging “strong affirmation for lack of information” (Cross 1977, 24–25). But why was Galbraith, one of the most formidable intellectual gladiators in the op-ed pages of his time, suddenly arguing against a posture of certainty in the face of incomplete information? The title was surely an “irony,” the *Washington Post* observed, “for a man who is rarely in doubt” (Nossiter 1977). This new posture, while perhaps more nuanced, posed some rhetorical challenges: as the world confronted successive waves of economic crisis in the late 1970s, audiences proved reluctant to listen to a prophet who now dwelled on the absence of readily available solutions. Milton Friedman, in viewing the series, drew attention to the limitations of Galbraith’s critical-historical posture. “I looked in vain for a central idea,” he observed. “All I could see was a man sneering at conventional solutions, without offering any of his own” (quoted in Holden 1980).

Galbraith’s historical subject matter posed another problem: how does one find visual material to accompany discussions about the history of economics? As one critic observed, “Art and science lend themselves to pictures,” providing ample fodder for Clark and Bronowski, “but economics—the dismal science—does not” (Meyer 1977). There were no rich tapestries or complex inventions for the camera to linger on during Galbraith’s extended narrations. The search for visual expression posed an insuperable challenge, as the *New Statesman* observed, for a discipline in which the “greatest exponents

have scarcely been able to express their ideas in intelligible prose” (Porteous 1977). In deciding how to overcome this problem, Galbraith and Malone made a crucial decision. Rather than relying primarily on shots set on contemporary locations and historical images and video, they would hire actors to reenact many of the scenes and situations that Galbraith described. Much of the series was devoted to elaborately costumed actors silently enacting their relations in exaggerated poses while Galbraith described the leading economic theories of the time. Thus viewers were shown a re-creation of the famous banquet at Delmonico’s in which actors dressed as waiters served stuffed life-sized dolls circling a table, in an elaborate play on Henry Ward Beecher’s reference to the diners’ “continually stuffed bodies”; or extended studio images from a metaphorical carnival, to demonstrate the so-called carnival ride set off by the rise of money.¹³

The reliance on exaggerated historical reenactments prevented Galbraith from adopting a posture of empiricism: rather than a detached observer of economic truths, he appeared as a roving master of elaborate visual fictions. The opening scene of *The Age of Uncertainty*, in a stunning moment of trompe l’oeil, overtly cast him as a conjurer of artifices rather than a teller of social-scientific truths. Galbraith began by speaking about the role of economic ideas in history in terms that most viewers would have presumed to be his own before he slyly revealed them to have been written by Keynes. Galbraith then stated, as the camera receded to reveal a stately Oxbridgian backdrop, that he was addressing his audience from Keynes’s rooms at King’s College. The camera, however, continued to recede, demonstrating that this too was a mirage, and he was instead delivering his lines from a tiny set in the midst of a vast black box theater. This was all, Galbraith announced, a “theatrical impression,” one of the many that would be used to illuminate his views. “The illusions of the theatre—and film—have long been used to give substance to abstraction, visual form to ideas.” As he stated these words, a set of costumed characters moved beneath his feet in rehearsed postures over a map of Europe. They were the “participants in the parade,” subjected to “the carnival of boom and slump,” and Galbraith was the showman who assembled and ordered the spectacle for the viewers watching from the quiet of their homes.¹⁴ Most documentaries elide the process of their own construction, and few commence with such an overt statement of narrative

¹³ John Kenneth Galbraith, transcripts, “The Morals & Manners of High Capitalism” and “The Rise and Fall of Money,” *The Age of Uncertainty*, BBC.

¹⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, transcript, “The Prophets and Promise of Classical Capitalism,” *The Age of Uncertainty*, BBC.

control. This, it seemed, would be a reflexive documentary: one that engaged in a metacommentary on its own construction and thereby encouraged readers to reflect on the partiality of its representation (Nichols 1991, 56). Galbraith, who already attracted some derision as a literary practitioner of an increasingly mathematical profession, would appear here as a weaver of narratives rather than a conduit for facts. He would not take advantage of the appearance of empiricism afforded by the visual form.

Few viewers, however, saw the reflexivity of *The Age of Uncertainty* as a sign of methodological sophistication; instead, most simply wondered why the costumes and sets were so unconvincing and the acting was so bad. The depiction of symbolic royalty, capitalists, and peasants in metaphorical dances on a giant map of Europe struck many, in the words of one critic, as “so puerile as to make me cringe with embarrassment.”¹⁵ Galbraith, who had granted authority to the BBC for the visual aspects of the series at the outset, hinted at some skepticism of their creations. “Let’s never forget that one word is worth a thousand pictures,” he observed in the first episode, not yet aware of the number of reviewers who would leverage that comment to explain the series’ flaws.¹⁶ Observers complained that the visual accompaniments to Galbraith’s words were “gimmickry” (“Making It Clear as Mud” 1977), a “nuisance” (Birtchall 1977), and signs that the documentary series was a “Play School version” of Galbraith’s ideas.¹⁷ Many, including the author and critic Martin Amis (1977), mocked the elaborate set pieces as signs of decadence. “While Galbraith drawled wryly on, we were offered a restful collage of diagrams, cartoons, allegories, emblems, stills, mock-ups, toytowns, old things superimposed on new things, new things superimposed on old things, modern chaps dressed up in antique garb, modern chaps not dressed up in antique garb,” he wrote. “Soon, no doubt, these boys will have appropriate footage for such concepts as ‘a’ and ‘the,’ so that the viewer can simply flop back and let his eyes do the listening.” The extravagant and self-conscious visuals in *The Age of Uncertainty* seemed to have done little to make Galbraith’s arguments more rhetorically compelling for his audience. In America, George Stigler (1977) wrote that the documentary had fulfilled his “fears about the effective use of television” as a medium for economics, as Galbraith “made no observable attempt to use visual methods to illuminate ideas”: in England,

¹⁵ Blaik Kirby, “Galbraith Series a Yawn,” box 581, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC Program Reviews: Canadian,” Galbraith Papers.

¹⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, transcript, “The Prophets and Promise of Classical Capitalism,” *Age of Uncertainty*.

¹⁷ Untitled article in *Sunday Telegraph*, January 16, 1977, box 1021, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: reviews: [American],” Galbraith Papers.

one observer noted that Galbraith's visuals seemed as though they had been "mischievously" devised by a conservative think tank "to distract attention from his message."¹⁸ Silent reenactments and composed dances, it seemed, were a disruptive complement to Galbraith's narrations; in a series on the social sciences, viewers manifested a preference for visual economy rather than excess.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the viewer response to the series, however, was the perception of Galbraith himself. In searching for a star, the producers had high expectations: the goal, Malone told a reporter, was to find someone "whose opinions have mattered for the past twenty years, and will go on mattering for some time to come" (Rees 1977). Among those who met this standard, Galbraith enjoyed the added advantage of international celebrity and a charismatic persona. His frequent presence around famous women had earned him the reputation, as one publication noted, as a "fascinating cavalier" (Field 1971). Perhaps alone among economists, his television appearances brought frequent references to his "sex-appeal" ("Now for the Sexy Ken Galbraith Show" 1977). *Cosmopolitan* named him one of the "sexiest men in the world" (Henry 1977a), journalists described him as "a kind of donnish Gary Cooper" (Rees 1977), and female viewers wrote letters to the *Times* dwelling on "his sensitive hands and his ravaged sardonic features" (Jemal 1977). One source of this fixation was his striking height: at well over six and a half feet tall, he physically embodied his academic stature and appeared always to be "looking down at" those around him (Hampshire 1977). Few scholars, at first blush, seemed so well suited to translate their discipline to a television audience.

During his extended monologues in *The Age of Uncertainty*, however, it soon became clear that Galbraith maintained a professorial demeanor that did not translate easily to a mass audience. His producers had observed the problem when Galbraith first submitted his proposed scripts. "There wasn't a sentence that didn't have three or four ideas in it," Malone later recalled. "Sometimes they got so dense that the viewer would miss the point" (Parker 2005, 517-18). Attempts to expunge complexity were not entirely successful: in viewing the final product, Martin Amis (1977) marveled at Galbraith's ability to state "the obvious as though it were excruciatingly, ticklishly oblique." In contrast to the spontaneous enthusiasms of Bronowski, Galbraith seemed to deliver his lines in a "monotonous drone" (O'Connor 1977). Critics found him "fidgety" and "vague" (Henry 1977a); "eccentric" and "wooden"

¹⁸ Welch, "Rich Wot Gets the Blame."

(Stigler 1977); “dry,” and, perhaps most damningly, “intellectual.”¹⁹ Even his defenders grew tired, at times, of his aura of “self-celebration” (Reed 1977). These personality traits attracted some ridicule in the British press and were not well-received in an American context that had long been noted for its anti-intellectualism. The best-known economic advocate of the poor seemed, in his public appearances, wholly alien to the people whose interests he was ostensibly defending. “If Galbraith would just stoop a little to hide his embarrassing height,” one journalist suggested, “adopt a humble, self-effacing personality, and disguise himself as one of those ‘people’s’ corn-belt Republicans, maybe someone would listen to him” (Smith 1978). Galbraith was condemned to purveying a populist message in elitist form.

Conservative intellectuals, who expressed anxiety about the impact of *The Age of Uncertainty* in the months leading up to its release, drew on a rapidly developing network of intellectuals, politicians, magazines, and policy institutions to critique the series and diminish Galbraith’s credibility. In their narrative, he received privileged treatment from a public media apparatus that uncritically supported the views of a liberal establishment. (Galbraith did not contest the notion that he was among the establishment, but insisted that he was on its “raffish fringe” [Stanley 1977].) Exploiting vulnerabilities exposed during the Nixon administration, they castigated the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for deviating from its mandate, dating from the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, to maintain “strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature.” The meaning of this requirement had never been entirely clear: did it entail balance across all programs on the schedule, or balance within each program itself? And how was balance to be defined across the infinitely broad spectrum of possible views (Ledbetter 1997, 97)? Galbraith was quick to point out to critics the range of conservative perspectives that were reflected on public television on shows such as William F. Buckley’s long-running program *Firing Line* and Louis Rukeyser’s *Wall Street Week*.²⁰ But well before *The Age of Uncertainty* appeared, his critics were already logging their dissatisfactions with his work in the *Congressional Record*. Barry Goldwater was sure that it would be “socialistic propaganda” and castigated the use of “taxpayer

¹⁹ “Fidgety” was the judgment of Bill Marvel (“The Economist Takes to the Tube,” box 1021, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: reviews: [American],” Galbraith Papers); “eccentric” was Welch’s term (“Rich Wot Gets the Blame”); and Kirby (“Galbraith Series a Yawn”) said “dry” and “intellectual.”

²⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, draft letter to Barry Goldwater (undated), box 577, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: Goldwater’s objection to PBS financing BBC series Congressional record,” Galbraith Papers.

money” to launch an attack on “the economic system upon which this country is built.”²¹ In the same year that the series was released, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) pushed unsuccessfully to have a Public Broadcasting Fairness Act write tangible requirements for “balance” into law (Ledbetter 1997, 98). The effect of all this was to leave public television executives highly skittish about any subject deemed politically controversial. As a result of these concerns, executives at the public television station in Los Angeles decided—without raising the possibility to Galbraith or the BBC—to append to each episode a brief critique of Galbraith’s analysis from a conservative perspective. To achieve this goal they turned to the Hoover Institution, which compiled a list of twelve prominent pundits, celebrities, and experts who were willing to add a few recriminations to counterbalance Galbraith’s views.

These appendages to the series, like the criticisms of Galbraith from the conservative press, dwelled repeatedly on several themes. Galbraith, they argued, was a member of an academic elite who sought to run the country themselves. Ronald Reagan had become expert in this rhetorical mode during his gubernatorial battles with the University of California. Galbraith’s series, he asserted in the final appended critique, implied “that leadership is best left to development by a group of wise mandarins on college campuses.” Decades of conservative populism had inspired him and his colleagues to associate arguments from the academic left with expressions of elitism. Presumably Reagan’s sympathies could be trusted to lie with a broader public instead.²² Even as some of Galbraith’s critics castigated him for his connections to the establishment, others tried to radicalize his views in order to marginalize them from mainstream policy debates. William F. Buckley Jr. represented Galbraith as an “avowed socialist” in the thrall of “his lifelong mistress, the state.”²³ *The Age of Uncertainty*, Albro Martin asserted in his remarks, “mocks the history of America, demeans it, makes it something to be ashamed of.”²⁴ Drawing on an argument that Friedrich Hayek had long promulgated, commentators also interpreted his views as the product of a misguided rationalism. Galbraith seems, Reagan argued, “to believe that it is a simple matter to identify what the community interest is.”²⁵ Here Reagan

²¹ Barry Goldwater, *Congressional Record* 121:15, June 17, 1975, S19253.

²² Ronald Reagan, response to episode 12, box 567, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: correspondence with KCET,” Galbraith Papers.

²³ William F. Buckley Jr., response to episode 1, box 567, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: correspondence with KCET,” Galbraith Papers.

²⁴ Albro Martin, response to episode 2, box 567, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: correspondence with KCET,” Galbraith Papers.

²⁵ Ronald Reagan, response to episode 12, box 567, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: correspondence with KCET,” Galbraith Papers.

cast himself as the defender of complexity: the virtue of capitalism, in his view, was that it bypassed many of the thorny problems of collective action by simply deferring to consumer choice. In *Encounter*, Kenneth Minogue drew attention to Galbraith's assertion in the book version of *The Age of Uncertainty* that "few social problems, if any, are difficult of solution," in order to highlight the imputed arrogance of planning. "Professor Galbraith believes that social and political problems are essentially simple," he wrote; "I believe them to be essentially complex" (Minogue 1978).

The final, and perhaps most effective, argument that critics leveraged against Galbraith was that he did not have sufficient credibility within the discipline to author a series of this kind. Galbraith maintained a public persona that was more common in Britain than the United States, deriving his authority from both elite social connections and an ability to engage with questions of public policy in terms that a layperson could understand. Many American economists remained skeptical of this model, seeking instead to justify their public authority in terms of technical accomplishments as judged by a small community of disciplinary peers (Fourcade 2009). Those who disagreed with Galbraith were quick to use such arguments to discredit his views among those who might otherwise be receptive. Milton Friedman was uniquely well positioned to launch just such an attack. His recent receipt of a Nobel Prize had provided him with an impeccable disciplinary signifier of technical accomplishment that Galbraith conspicuously lacked. Unlike most recipients of the prize, Friedman had also demonstrated—in both his *Newsweek* columns and *Capitalism and Freedom*—a capacity for engaging economic questions in a language that a broad public could understand. His celebrity was fast approaching Galbraith's own: media outlets covered him as the Harvard economist's "principal bete noir" (Nadel 1977) and adopted the two of them as "helpful reference points at opposite ends of the spectrum" (Curley 1980). Galbraith himself joked that, in the face of the publicity surrounding Friedman, *The Age of Uncertainty* was just his bid for "a little equal time."²⁶ Friedman was capable of matching Galbraith in public stature while arguing that only his had been legitimately earned.

A year before the release of *The Age of Uncertainty*, the market-oriented Institute of Economic Affairs in London recruited Friedman to give a public lecture on Galbraith to a group of businessmen, journalists, and political

²⁶ Don McGillivray, Southam News Services, "Economists Need Watching" (publication and date unknown), box 581, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program reviews: Canadian," Galbraith Papers.

leaders at a church in Westminster.²⁷ The goals, presumably, were to undermine Galbraith's credibility and provide an array of useful arguments to conservative intellectuals before the series aired. The extent to which Friedman's analysis anticipated, and perhaps helped form, later criticisms of Galbraith's series is striking. Galbraith was an "arrogant" elitist who believed that all questions should be solved by an intellectual "aristocracy" of which he was a notable member. He was (ironically, given his famous distaste for the profession) an "advertiser par excellence" whose views achieved wide acceptance because they were "easy to understand," in contrast to the more challenging complexities of free market economics. And he pretended to be a scientist seeking answers when he was, in truth, a "missionary seeking converts." His theories had never been empirically "demonstrated" and had "never found any acceptance in the *academic* world" (Friedman 1977, 17, 30–31, 35–36). Friedman positioned himself, in contrast, as a populist who deferred to the opinions of the masses by leaving decisions to the decrees of a marketplace that was outside his control. While Galbraith attempted to persuade others by filtering simplistic arguments through his formidable literary imagination, Friedman cast himself as the defender of his own discipline's scientific and empirical foundations. Galbraith, who owned a house near the Friedmans in Vermont and had long been a personal friend, saw this assault as yet another public skirmish in an ongoing political war. But, in contrast to his iconoclastic opponent, he had never held out much hope that his message would achieve traction in the public arena. He acknowledged an "affinity for lost causes" and implied in private correspondence that this new television series might be yet another. While many of his friends considered Friedman's London lectures bad form, Galbraith claimed to have been patiently explaining to them that this was merely "what a man must do to win the Nobel Prize."²⁸

Days after *The Age of Uncertainty* first aired in England, Milton Friedman received a call at his new home in San Francisco. After nearly three decades at the University of Chicago, he had recently resigned his post to accept a temporary visiting position at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco followed by a permanent appointment at the conservative Hoover Institution (Friedman and Friedman 1998, 471). Having purchased an apartment with the

²⁷ "Economics Viewed as a Martial Art," *Times* (London), September 2, 1976.

²⁸ "Readable Economics," *Auckland Chronicle*, 1977, box 1072, folder "[General: 1977]," Galbraith Papers; John Kenneth Galbraith to John Wood, February 15, 1977, box 149, folder 5, Milton Friedman Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California (hereafter cited as Friedman Papers).

proceeds from the Nobel Prize, Friedman now faced the prospect of life in a new city without all of the regular commitments that affiliation with a university economics department entailed. He was free to pursue his own interests for the foreseeable future to a degree that academia rarely allowed. But the person on the other end of the line, an executive at a small public radio station in Erie, Pennsylvania, was proposing to fill this newfound free time with a radical departure from his previous work. Would Friedman, as the leading free market advocate in the public sphere, consider making a television documentary about his own ideas?

It was a prospect that Friedman had begun considering not long after learning that Galbraith was at work on a series for the BBC. In private correspondence, Friedman wrote that it would be “highly desirable to have a good deal more exposure of the ideas of liberty and freedom on television.” He had lobbied for the idea among program officers at market-oriented foundations, telling them that one of “the most effective things they could do would be to sponsor a regular program, preferably on commercial TV, presenting economic ideas in a serious way.”²⁹ PBS executives, under political pressure to maintain “balance” as the release of Galbraith’s series approached, expressed their own enthusiasm at the idea of providing Friedman with a venue to express his contrary views. “I can only say again how anxious we are,” a vice president at the network wrote to Friedman in the summer of 1976, “to discuss with you at greater length the possibility of putting together some form of commentary or critical analysis or even ‘counter programming’ vis-a-vis the Galbraith series.”³⁰ Even conservative politicians, when confronted by the Galbraith series, independently arrived at the conclusion that Friedman should develop a set of competing documentaries of his own.³¹ Although Friedman had not yet made any specific plans, upon picking up the phone in January 1977 he was prepared to listen.

The executive on the other end of the line, however, was very different from the one who had first approached Galbraith nearly four years before. *The Age of Uncertainty* was developed from the outset by leading figures in the small community of producers and technicians who had invented the long-format public television documentary, and their work had attracted impressive audiences and critical accolades (Dornfeld 1998, 43). Robert Chitester, the executive who contacted Friedman, ran a small public-television station that was barely a decade old, and his most substantial programming success had been a

²⁹ Milton Friedman to Roy A. Childs Jr., March 18, 1976, box 11, folder 4, Friedman Papers.

³⁰ Charles Lichenstein, July 27, 1976, box 149, folder 5, Friedman Papers.

³¹ Jack Kemp to John C. Kerr Jr., January 9, 1978, box 224, folder 3, Friedman Papers.

series on tropical fish called *From Guppies to Groupers*. And unlike the team that had contacted Galbraith seeking to develop an “objective” overview of the history of social science, Chitester wanted to sponsor the series for overtly political reasons. A onetime Democrat who had distributed leaflets for McGovern in 1972, he had experienced a dramatic political conversion after reading *Capitalism and Freedom* only months before he first contacted Friedman. Chitester quickly concluded that “economic freedom had to exist, or the rest of the freedoms could not,” and his social philosophy became “settled” in a way that it “had never been before” (Cox 1980, 43). The book became Chitester’s “Bible,” and his “faith in the market” became “absolute.” He dreamed of serving as an evangelist to bring Friedman’s news to a broader public than could be reached through his books and *Newsweek* articles alone. But Chitester was also a slightly peculiar character, who attended meetings with open shirts and forced colleagues to warn potential business partners that they would likely find him “eccentric” (Bernstein 1980, 108–9). This was a longshot bid.

Although Friedman was intrigued by the prospect and flattered by Chitester’s enthusiasm, he initially expressed skepticism about the proposal. His *Newsweek* columns and well-received appearances on *The Phil Donahue Show* had brought him to a broader public, but he still agreed with Hayek that he could change popular opinion more effectively by “persuading economists” rather than the “public at large.” But here, as with the development of *Capitalism and Freedom* decades earlier, Rose Friedman pushed him to expand his rhetorical horizons (Bernstein 1980, 109). Her job was perhaps made easier by the near-complete freedom granted to them by Friedman’s new research position. After four meetings at the Friedmans’ apartment, they agreed to develop the series. Chitester, in a state of “euphoria,” quickly began planning for the enterprise.

The “basic idea,” as Friedman informed his colleagues, was “really to put *Capitalism and Freedom* on TV.”³² But newspapers that picked up on the enterprise immediately saw it as a direct response to *The Age of Uncertainty*. As “the two men do not form a mutual admiration society,” the *New York Post* observed, it “should surprise no one” that “Milton is about to try something” at which Galbraith had “failed” (“Nobel Winner Set for TV Show” 1977).

Whereas Galbraith’s series had obtained all its financing from public television outlets and struggled to maintain even a modicum of corporate support, Chitester and Friedman decided to raise all of their \$2.8 million in

³² Milton Friedman to Arnold Moore, October 4, 1977, box 224, folder 7, Friedman Papers.

projected costs entirely from outside funders. Chitester set up a nonprofit entity with a board well stocked with Fortune 500 executives to assuage potential concerns about donations to a small public radio station. From the beginning, foundations and corporations proved enthusiastic about contributing to the enterprise, which allowed them to make a nonprofit donation to support the propagation of ideas they supported while receiving exposure among a wealthy public-television audience. The Olin Foundation provided space at the New York Athletic Club for an initial meeting to develop the concept for the project, and its \$250,000 contribution was soon accompanied by \$500,000 from the Sarah Scaife Foundation, \$300,000 from the Reader's Digest Association, \$240,000 from Getty Oil, and donations from eleven other underwriters ranging from General Motors and Bechtel to a charity fund managed by a maker of pressure cookers (Bernstein 1980, 108–11). William Jovanovich of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who sympathized with Friedman's ideas, provided financing for a preliminary lecture series under favorable terms (Friedman and Friedman 1998, 477). In courting support, Friedman and Chitester could afford to be selective: they discouraged contributions from major corporations, and particularly oil companies, to maintain representation from "small industries" and to "avoid any impression whatsoever that the program represented paid apologies for a particular segment."³³ Chitester relied on the idea that PBS, with its budget squeezed and its ideological orientation under constant scrutiny, would find it impossible to turn down a fully paid-for documentary series presented by a Nobel laureate. Friedman later recalled his prescience in believing that "the pressure to provide some balance to Galbraith's clearly ideological series would make it impossible for them to refuse to broadcast a program . . . which presented the other side" (Friedman and Friedman 1998, 474). Friedman's series was made possible by a potent combination of ideologically committed staff and a rapidly developing network of corporation and foundation support. This infrastructure, in combination with political pressure from conservatives in Congress and relentless critiques of media bias, established a model that would prove central to the propagation of free market ideas in the decades that followed.

Although Friedman acknowledged that his series was inspired by Galbraith's prior effort, he quite explicitly avoided using its format as a model. (In correspondence he conspicuously cited Bronowski as the closest analogue

³³ Robert Chitester to George Schultz, October 7, 1977, box 61, folder 6, Friedman Papers; Friedman to Moore, Friedman Papers.

to the format he was trying to capture.)³⁴ Several qualities would quite sharply differentiate his approach from Galbraith's. First, his series would not be presented under any pretense of neutrality; instead, he would unabashedly try to convince viewers of his philosophical perspective. Chitester marketed it as such to prospective funders, writing to Charles Koch that it would be "a strong statement on the need for a free market."³⁵ Rose Friedman publicly acknowledged that they were inspired to develop the show out of a "missionary instinct" (Bernstein 1980, 110, sidebar). And Friedman himself quite frankly stated that it was not "a series in economics" but "a personal statement of my own social, economic, and political values."³⁶ Second, the series would not dwell on historical subjects. Rather, it would be presented from a contemporary perspective, and its footage would focus entirely on real-world images of people and organizations who exemplified the point that he was trying to make. Rather than jumping around the world from instant-to-instant, each program would be rooted on a single problem and a few discrete locations, allowing Friedman to draw out his perspective with carefully chosen examples at somewhat greater length. Finally, the documentary footage would consume only a half hour, rather than a full hour, with the rest of the program consisting of Friedman in debate with a small group of individuals who expressed varying degrees of sympathy to his point of view.

Each of these decisions had important effects on the structure and reception of the series and help illuminate the posture that Friedman adopted in attempting to persuade a broader public of his views. Friedman was acutely conscious that public interest in economic ideas relied partly on an appearance of controversy. When a journalist asked him why economics was turning into a combative branch of show business, he immediately replied that "nobody wants to hear economists talk about subjects on which they are agreeing."³⁷ He sensed that any interest that the series inspired would result from the clarity of his policy prescriptions, rather than the skill with which they were effaced. At the same time, he believed that an appearance of empiricism was crucial to convincing others of his views. Friedman may have readily announced his iconoclasm, but he repeatedly insisted that it was founded on a careful scientific analysis of all the available data. As work began on the series, he expressed a strong desire to avoid all "gimmicks" and insisted that his "own participation and the impact of ideas should not be diluted by obviously

³⁴ Milton Friedman to Arthur Nielsen, June 28, 1977, box 225, folder 1, Friedman Papers.

³⁵ Robert Chitester to Charles Koch, October 6, 1977, box 61, folder 6, Friedman Papers.

³⁶ Milton Friedman to John A. Howard, March 11, 1980, box 224, folder 2, Friedman Papers.

³⁷ "Economics Viewed as a Martial Art."

artificial activities.” One searches in vain for any signs of reflexivity in *Free to Choose*. Instead, Friedman constantly thrust himself among the subjects of his analysis, leveraging the distinctive ability of visual observation to persuade. And he emphasized, in particular, the texture of everyday life. “If we are to rest our case on spectaculars, I am afraid government would not come out badly,” he wrote to one funder. Voyages to the moon and military endeavors had a certain aesthetic appeal. Instead, he wanted to focus on the successes of corporations in transforming the practices of “everyday humdrum life.”³⁸ Thus when speaking about welfare, Friedman dwelled on images from a single public housing project where he argued that government policies had helped make poverty more intractable; when discussing schools, he focused on a wealthy public school to criticize the taxing of the poor to fund an educational system that delivered superior outcomes to members of the middle class.³⁹ Every argument was supported by real-world footage that provided anecdotal validations of his claims.

The extended discussion sessions at the end were intended, in part, to satisfy what he saw as the public desire for sharp disagreement and verbal sparring. They also implicitly addressed the mandate for public television to include balanced views (without requiring any appended rebuttals) and helped validate its star’s claims that he was engaged in an earnest and tough-minded search for the truth. (*The Wall Street Journal*, not realizing that Friedman added these sessions voluntarily and that Galbraith had been required to include rebuttals, implied bias in noting that “the TV people subjected Mr. Galbraith to no such scrutiny” [Malabre 1980].) Perhaps most importantly, however, they took advantage of Friedman’s unique proficiency at interpersonal debate. Galbraith himself acknowledged, when asked to participate in these discussions, that this was a mode at which Friedman was superior. Applying the principle of “comparative advantage,” he informed Friedman that he preferred to relay his ideas in prose, as “I am far better than you in writing, and you are far more expert in debate.”⁴⁰ Friedman—who filmed all of the discussion sessions over a few days at the University of Chicago and sought to minimize any editing—found himself on the defensive more often than not in his public appearances, as his interlocutors pushed back

³⁸ Milton Friedman to Anthony Jay and Michael Peacock, December 18, 1977, box 224, folder 3, Friedman Papers; Milton Friedman to Denis M. Slavich, August 30, 1977, box 225, folder 6, Friedman Papers.

³⁹ Milton Friedman, transcripts, “From Cradle to Grave” and “What’s Wrong with Our Schools?,” in *Free to Choose* (television series), WQLN.

⁴⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith to Milton Friedman, September 27, 1979, box 200, folder “Friedman, Milton/1984–1978,” Galbraith Papers.

against his sometimes convenient decisions about what information to emphasize and what to obscure.⁴¹ But the sessions provided viewers with the excitement of competitive punditry, and allowed Friedman to display the formidable forensic skills he had developed on shows like *Firing Line* and *Donahue* and two decades of frequent public appearances before often-hostile crowds.

Friedman's self-presentation throughout the series posed a sharp contrast with Galbraith's. The differences began with their height: while Galbraith towered over his subjects, projecting an aura of lofty superiority, Friedman looked up at the world with what one friendly reviewer referred to as "elfin charm" from nearly twenty inches below (Malabre 1980). Whereas Galbraith read from elaborately prepared scripts, Friedman was entirely extemporaneous: he began preparing his comments on the set as the crews were setting up their equipment and performed even the precisely timed dubbing sessions entirely off the cuff (Friedman and Friedman 1998, 483, 491). Claiming that he was too "literal-minded" to understand Galbraith's "more subtle allusions," Friedman abandoned any pretense of literary style in favor of simple exposition.⁴² While Galbraith's producers labored to shorten his sentences and simplify his ideas, Friedman's praised their star for his reliance on "good, clean, two-syllable words" (Bernstein 1980, 110, sidebar). All "jargon" was avoided in *Free to Choose*, a reviewer in *American Film* wrote, in favor of "short sentences, simple ideas, and unsubtle illustrations" (Mayer 1980). Friedman's effect on viewers was evident in the letters that began to arrive as the series aired. A college student expressed his gratitude for Friedman's ability to develop arguments in terms that seemed "spontaneous" and "understandable" to the "layman viewer."⁴³ Another told him that it was "rare to find a brilliant intellectual who is so able at expressing his ideas so that the average person can understand."⁴⁴ Others expressed confusion at how such a coherent message could elude the understanding of academics and policy elites. "It really is so simple," one wrote, in a message that was echoed by many of her peers.⁴⁵ The clarity and consistency of Friedman's message convinced many viewers that there were clean solutions to problems that other opinion leaders continued to represent as messy. While

⁴¹ See, for example, the discussion with Peter Jay in "Created Equal" and the discussion with Albert Shanker and others in "What's Wrong with Our Schools," *Free to Choose* (television series), WQLN.

⁴² Milton Friedman to John Kenneth Galbraith, October 1, 1978, box 200, folder "Friedman, Milton: 1984-1978," Galbraith Papers.

⁴³ Devin Warner to WQLN, July 20, 1980, box 226, folder 1, Friedman Papers.

⁴⁴ Ann Hanley to Milton Friedman, April 17, 1980, box 8, folder 4, Friedman Papers.

⁴⁵ Joan Person to Milton Friedman, April 18, 1980, box 8, folder 4, Friedman Papers.

Galbraith dwelled on the collapse of the certainties of earlier eras, Friedman was busy propounding replacements to suit the needs of his own.

Friedman wanted his message in the series to continue reaching young audiences long after its network runs had concluded. Following its release to largely positive reviews, he devoted close and sustained attention to increasing its availability for students in high schools and colleges. Friedman had long been intrigued by the idea that college lectures should be videotaped by the most effective instructors in their fields and widely distributed, rather than entrusted to the inferior talents who inhabited most university positions.⁴⁶ In *Free to Choose*, he now possessed a set of videos that were far more lavishly illustrated and produced than was possible in any conventional set of lectures. The challenge was how to price them for broad distribution in the era that preceded the widespread availability of inexpensive videocassettes. Video copies of *The Age of Uncertainty* had languished on the shelves largely because of high prices, yielding sales figures that distributors described as “troubling and slow.”⁴⁷ Friedman’s sympathizers at the Americanism Educational League thereby devised a system in which they purchased over a dozen copies and loaned them out to colleges and universities for free. Within months they were lending them to over eighty colleges; six years later, the number was in the hundreds, and they informed Friedman that nearly all their copies were “out on loan all of the time.”⁴⁸ Friedman also deemed high schools “a particularly critical area for affecting long-range public opinion” and courted support from foundations for a project to develop filmstrips and elaborate curricular materials for use across the country.⁴⁹ And when the opportunity presented itself, he bought back the rights to the series to make it available on videocassette at minimal prices (Friedman and Friedman 1998, 502). While Galbraith assiduously cultivated his connections to people in positions of political influence, Friedman insisted from the outset of his work on *Free to Choose* that “our fundamental appeal must be to the young and not to those already in the establishment.”⁵⁰ Ever the economist, he believed that reaching this audience would require close attention to pricing and

⁴⁶ See, for example, Milton Friedman to Larry Moss, August 23, 1978, box 224, folder 7, Friedman Papers.

⁴⁷ Letter from Gale Livengood, box 577, folder “The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: materials sent by Charles Benton: December 1977 (1 of 2),” Galbraith Papers.

⁴⁸ Milton Friedman to John Sloan, July 29, 1987, box 225, folder 1, Friedman Papers.

⁴⁹ Milton Friedman to Richard M. Larry, Sarah Scaife Foundation, January 16, 1981, box 224, folder 5, Friedman Papers.

⁵⁰ Milton Friedman to Robert Chitester, December 7, 1978, box 223, folder 5, Friedman Papers.

opportunity costs, and worked assiduously to ensure that both remained low.

Although *Free to Choose* contained few novel arguments and little new information, the documentary series and companion volume soon became the most popular distillation of Friedman's economic and political views. In conjunction they provided perhaps the clearest exemplar of his fully developed persuasive technique. In the series Friedman selfconsciously sought to avoid the rhetorical shortcomings of his political allies and exploit those of his political foes. He believed that market advocates should represent their views as simple in concept, populist in tone, empirical in methodology, and capable of solving the great problems of the modern world. This message found an eager audience among corporate executives and think tanks, and Friedman exploited these networks to disseminate his ideas among those whose opinions were not yet fully formed.

Galbraith, as one might expect, was horrified by Friedman's means of persuasion. He found the arguments Friedman adopted "simplistic" and perhaps even "purely rhetorical," relying "almost wholly on passionate assertion and emotional response" (Galbraith 1981b). He marveled at the "radicalism" of economic ideas in the early 1980s, labeling himself a dispositional "conservative" by comparison (Galbraith 1981d) and expressing new sympathy for the rapidly receding "responsible right" (Galbraith 1981a). But even as he disparaged what he saw as the reductive extremity of Friedman's ideas, he acknowledged that they had shifted public opinion far more effectively than his own. Friedman, he wrote in the late 1980s, was "perhaps the most influential economic figure of the second half of the twentieth century" (Galbraith 1987, 271). Galbraith may never have accepted Friedman's economics, but he developed a reluctant admiration for Friedman's ability to convince others of his views.

Any study of the public life of economic ideas must confront problems of rhetoric and transmission, and engage with activities that extend far beyond the journals, lecture halls, and seminar rooms that have long formed the backbone of disciplinary history. *The Age of Uncertainty* and *Free to Choose* reveal the extent to which the nature of these public activities had changed over a single generation. During the final quarter of the twentieth century, the advocacy of economic ideas relied more heavily than ever before on dense layers of intermediary institutions. Those who compared the qualities of the respective series' early production teams might have assumed that Galbraith's establishment credentials lent him every advantage, and Friedman himself did not hesitate to draw on that argument when it served his ends. But the

production of *Free to Choose* relied on an advocacy network that proved, even at this early stage, remarkably effective. In contrast to Galbraith's persistent failure to attract corporate sponsorship, Friedman had little trouble financing his series entirely through business and foundation support. Even as the expensive reels of Galbraith's series languished on distributors' shelves, Friedman enjoyed help from organizations that developed extensive curricular materials and made pedagogical usage of the series free. And while Friedman's series was released to a largely genial critical reception, Galbraith's was met with a carefully orchestrated hostile response. The Institute for Economic Affairs arranged for public lectures, including Friedman's, that would discredit Galbraith's ideas; the Hoover Institution helped assemble the critical respondents whose views were appended to each episode; and publications including *Barron's*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *National Review*, in conjunction with a number of Friedman's fellow members of the Mont Pèlerin Society, met the release of the series with a set of sharply critical reviews. Friedman could rely on a network of allied institutions to provide the forms of support that this new era of advocacy required.

Free to Choose was a popular success for many reasons, including Friedman's disciplinary credibility, his populist persona, and the financial and promotional support provided by sympathetic institutions. At the center of his appeal, however, lay the force of the market metaphor. While Friedman's rhetoric aligned well with the requirements of late twentieth-century modes of transmission, Galbraith never found a way to distill his views in such simple and broadly applicable terms. As one journalist wrote before the release of either documentary, to be an "economic superstar" it was necessary to arrive at a "fixed view of the world, learn to state it forcefully and cast unremitting scorn on those who disagree."⁵¹ This may have been cynical, but it was not entirely untrue. The reductivism of economic debate in recent years can be attributed, in part, to the pattern of consumer demand.

References

- Amis, Martin. 1977. "Capitalism and the Camera-Angle." *Sunday Times*, January 16.
- Barnouw, Erik. 1993. *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*. 2d rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, Peter. 1980. "The Man Who Brought You Milton Friedman." *Fortune*,

⁵¹ "Economics Viewed as a Martial Art."

- February 25, 108–11, 122.
- Birtchall, Tony. 1977. "Economic Delivery." *Journal* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), February 24.
- Briggs, Asa. 1985. *The BBC: The First Fifty Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Church, Michael. 1977. "Coming Clear." *Times*, January 25.
- Cox, Patrick. 1980. "Public Television Maverick." *Reason*, October, 43–44.
- Crisell, Andrew. 1997. *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*. London: Routledge.
- Cross, Robert. 1977. "Dialog: John Kenneth Galbraith." *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, May 15, 24–25, 43–44.
- Curley, Anne. 1980. "TV Gets a New Uncle Milty." *Milwaukee Journal*, January 11.
- Dornfeld, Barry. 1998. *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Field, Leslie. 1971. "The Secrets . . . of a Woman's Kind of Man." *Daily Mail*, November 27.
- "Figuring to Be a Star." 1977. *Birmingham Evening Mail*, January 6.
- Fourcade, Marion. 2009. *Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s to 1990s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Friedman, Milton. 1977. *Friedman on Galbraith: And on Curing the British Disease*. Vancouver, B.C.: Fraser Institute.
- Friedman, Milton, and Rose D. Friedman. 1998. *Two Lucky People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furner, Mary. 1975. *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Galbraith, John Kenneth. 1981a. "All Quiet on the Conservative Front." *Washington Post*, April 29.
- . 1981b. "The Conservative Onslaught." *New York Review of Books*, January 22, 30–36.
- . 1981c. *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs*. New York: Ballantine.
- . 1981d. "Musings of a (Relative) Conservative." *New York Times*, January 4.
- . 1987. *Economics in Perspective: A Critical History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hampshire, Stuart. 1977. "Watch This Man." *Vogue*, May, 241, 283.
- Henry, William A., III. 1977a. "Galbraith's First Law Put to the Test." *Boston Globe*, May 22.
- . 1977b. "Uncertainty? Not Galbraith." *Boston Globe*, May 20.
- Holden, Anthony. 1980. "The Free Market Man." *Observer*, February 17.
- Ingrams, Richard. 1977. "More Banality." *Spectator*, February 12.
- Jemal, Biddy. 1977. "BBC2's Most Fascinating Man." Letter to the editor. *Sunday Times*, January 23.
- Jewkes, John. 1977. "Critic of Capitalists." *Daily Telegraph*, February 7.
- "John Kenneth Galbraith Tells *Focus* about His Upcoming Series on Economics: *The Age of Uncertainty*." 1976. *Focus*, August. Box 566, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: articles: Focus, August 1976," Galbraith Papers.
- Kelley, David. 1977. "Distorted Picture: A Hard Look at Galbraith's 'Age of Uncertainty.'" *Barron's*, July 18.

- Kilborn, Peter. 1977. "Galbraith on TV." *New York Times*, March 20.
- Last, Richard. 1977. "Galbraith Sustains a Hymn of Hate." *Daily Telegraph*, January 18.
- Ledbetter, James. 1997. *Made Possible by . . . the Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. London: Verso.
- Lyon, Jim. 1976. "Seeing the Light at Last." *Vancouver Sun*, May 15.
- "Making It Clear as Mud." 1977. *Northwestern Evening Mail*, January 15.
- Malabre, Alfred L., Jr. 1980. "The Milton Friedman Show." *Wall Street Journal*, January 11.
- Mayer, Martin. 1980. "Uncle Miltie's Money Talk." *American Film*, April, 10–12.
- Meyer, Karl E. 1977. "The Revelation according to Prophet Galbraith." *Socialist Review*, May 28. Box 1021, folder "The Age of Uncertainty: BBC program: reviews: [American]," Galbraith Papers.
- Minogue, Kenneth. 1977. "Galbraith's Wit and Unwisdom: Ordeal by Caricature." *Encounter*, December, 14–18.
- . 1978. "The Galbraithian Fallacy." *Encounter*, April, 88–89.
- Mitchell, Henry. 1974. "The Way BBC Works." *Washington Post*, March 8.
- Nadel, Gerry. 1977. "Galbraith's No Nobel Laureate, but He Is a TV Star." *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 24.
- Nichols, Bill. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- "Nobel Winner Set for TV Show." 1977. *New York Post*, December 6.
- Nossiter, Bernard D. 1977. "Galbraith and the BBC: Entertaining Economics." *Washington Post*, January 8.
- "Now for the Sexy Ken Galbraith Show." 1977. *Daily Mail*, January 6.
- O'Connor, John J. 1977. "TV: Galbraith Offers 'A Personal View.'" *New York Times*, May 19.
- Parker, Richard. 2005. *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Porteous, John. 1977. "Money Talks." *New Statesman*, February 25.
- Reed, Clayton. 1977. "Show Biz." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 28.
- Rees, Jenny. 1977. "The Most Unlikely Superstars of All . . ." *Daily Mail*, January 8.
- Ruby, Michael. 1977. "The Galbraith Show." *Newsweek*, May 23, 61–64.
- Smith, R. C. 1978. "John Kenneth Galbraith, Some of Us Hear You!" *Charlotte News*, August 31.
- Stanley, Don. 1977. "Galbraith: Goad and Gadfly." *Vancouver Sun*, May 13.
- Stigler, George. 1977. "The Heckler: John Kenneth Galbraith's Marathon Television Series." *National Review*, May 27, 601–4.
- "TV Series Better in Print." 1977. *Crew Chronicle*, March 2. Box 1021, folder "Books: The Age of Uncertainty, 1977," Galbraith Papers.