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## **Education versus standard of living in the considerations of classical and modern neoliberal approaches**

### INTRODUCTION

The industrial revolution has contributed to transformations in three important areas: technical, economic and social. The new technologies have enabled the transition from manual work to machine work (mechanisation and automation of the production processes continue and give rise to both positive and negative consequences). For the economic transformation, the new production systems forced changes not only in the organisation of production (the development of factory production has contributed to the marginalisation of the role of the guild system and small-scale production in increasing wealth) but also contributed to the deepening of the division of labour and specialisation, as well as to the dissemination of economic accounts as a tool for making decisions. With these social transformations, the new economic order favoured the transition from rural to urban (industrial) society, and this in turn was associated with the disappearance of the traditional family model and traditional social system. There was a transition from the estate-based to the class/strata organisation of society, which while it stimulated the activity and entrepreneurship of individuals, i.e. the desire to learn and acquire new skills in order to get richer and improve living conditions, while also giving rise to social conflicts, i.e. it favoured the struggle for a fairer distribution of already created wealth (manifestations of this demanding attitude are also currently visible and related to the surge of populism, which affects the state of public finances) and for the activation of the state in the social, employee, health and education spheres.

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Transformations in all the above spheres contributed to the modernisation of societies and the gradual democratisation of political systems, which in turn translated into socio-economic development, including the efficiency of the education system (quality and level of teaching), which significantly affects not only the conditions of wealth multiplication, but also determines the standards of living (which translates into economic awareness) (Dahrendorf, 1993, pp. 48–50).

The paper aims to present the views of the classics of economic thought, i.e. Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and a representative of modern liberal thought, i.e. Milton Friedman, on the relationship between the accumulated knowledge of the educational system and the standard of living in terms of the management of the individual and society as a whole.

#### SMITH'S VIEW ON THE DIVISION OF LABOUR, WEALTH AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

As a liberal, Adam Smith claimed that the freedom of individual action is inextricably linked to private property, personal freedom and freedom of conducting economic activity. “(...) *Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way*” (Smith, 1954, vol. II, pp. 394–395). In such a reality, the state should not interfere in the economic process, but only create conditions conducive to human self-realisation. A free entity (both the producer and the consumer), self-managing, stimulates entrepreneurship, which is naturally associated with satisfying one's own needs and achieving the desired level of personal welfare (and indirectly, the welfare of the whole society). Smith, in following this line of reasoning, states that an economic entity always acts rationally, and when conducting a business activity it is guided by the motive of individual benefits (satisfying one's material needs and achieving wealth). The implementation of individual benefits not only stimulates diligence and increases productivity but also determines the rate of capital accumulation, and thus the level of production and the degree of satisfying perceived needs, i.e. the standard of living (Bremond, Salort 1994, pp. 292–295; Cambell, 1971, pp. 16–23; Gray, 1994, p. 39; O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 9–16, Szarzec, 2013, pp. 21–29; Zabiegalik, 2002, pp. 123–130). The selfish attitude of the economic entity contributes in parallel to technical and social progress, and thus to an increase in wealth and the dissemination of prosperity: “(...) *by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it*” (Smith, 2007, vol. 2, p. 40). Thus, the human instinct for self-preservation contributes to the

emergence of individual benefits, which generate two effects: on the one hand, they contribute to multiplying the wealth of the individual, and on the other, they trigger the process of social progress, which ultimately leads to an increase in the wealth of the state and an improvement in the standard of living of the whole society (Piątek, Szarzec, 2008, pp. 67–77).

Smith, in discussing the economic activities of the economic entity, naturally deals with the problem of the wealth of the nation and combines it with work (with the level of primarily productive employment) (Buchan, 2008, pp. 114–116; O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 9–10). This is why he states: "*The annual produce of the land and labour of any nation can be increased in its value by no other means, but by increasing either the number of its productive labourers, or the productive powers of those labourers who had before been employed. The number of its productive labourers, it is evident, can never be much increased, but in consequence of an increase in capital, or of the funds destined for maintaining them. The productive powers of the same number of labourers cannot be increased, but in consequence either of some addition and improvement to those machines and instruments which facilitate and abridge labour*" (Smith, 1954, vol. I, p. 435). The above statement shows that most people intend and want to improve the quality of their lives through the accumulation of wealth, which is regarded as its most universal and obvious measure (Smith, 2007, vol. I, p. 387).

In Smith's interpretation, the size of a nation's wealth directly depends on two factors: the size of employment (primarily productive) and labour productivity (in indirect analysis it also takes into account capital accumulation), while labour productivity is closely related to the division of labour (however, division of labour is limited by the size of the market) and specialisation (which promotes the development of skills and creativity) of the employed individuals. Division of labour thus affects technical progress, and hence it increases skills, i.e. it provides new knowledge, which in turn contributes to the emergence of new professions and an increase in labour productivity. Therefore, an advanced division of labour stimulates the rate of economic growth and thus determines the standard of living, while also encouraging the development of the education system.

Smith derives the division of labour from man's natural tendency to exchange and cooperate. The willingness to exchange enforces free competition, which guarantees optimal allocation of resources, including work, desired entrepreneurship development, approved price level, desired supply of goods (appropriate level of consumption) and optimal level of income for all participants of the management process. Based on the above interpretation, Smith concludes that the division of labour (knowledge and skills) directly determines the level of wages, while advocating a "good" wage, encouraging the individual to work more efficiently and to reproduce at the same time (Grzybek, 2018, p. 73–85; O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 56–58; Smith, 2007, vol. 1, pp. 93–97, 116–124; Warsh, 2012, pp. 42–43).

Smith, by linking wealth to the division of labour and the division of efficiency and inventiveness, emphasises the importance of knowledge (ignorance) and skills (lack of skills) of employed individuals in the process of increasing wealth and material affluence. In this approach, knowledge determines the pace of socio-economic development of the country. Smith, noticing the discrepancy between the knowledge of employees and the pace of technical progress, is in favour of introducing publicly available basic education (learning to read, write and count) to the poorer part of society (in relation to education for children and adults, the education institutions are divided into upbringing and educating people, regardless of age), with the obligation to create schools ceded to the state (the costs of educating the poor should be covered by the state from taxes, but with minimal parental involvement). *“The education of the common people requires, perhaps, in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the public, more than the education of some people of rank and fortune. (...) the common people (...) have little time to spare for education. Their parents can scarce afford to maintain them, even in infancy. As soon as they are able to work, they must apply to some trade, by which they can earn their subsistence”* (Smith, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 449–450). The financial effort undertaken by the state and learners (parents) translates into an increase in employees’ skills, and this contributes to an increase in production and income, and thus to the improvement of living conditions.

According to Smith, technical progress has two effects: firstly, it shapes relations of production, and, secondly, it encourages the acquisition of new knowledge and increase in skills. Thus: *“Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition; and where all the superior ranks of people were secured from it, the inferior ranks could not be much exposed to it”* (Smith, 2007, vol. 2, p. 454).

#### MILL’S VIEW ON EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR INFLUENCING THE STANDARD OF LIVING

In the third decade of the nineteenth century, both positive and negative consequences of the transformations in the economic and social sphere emerge. The pursuit of profit, on the one hand, accelerates the process of concentration of capital and production, but on the other, it intensifies the polarisation of society and increases the scale of poverty among workers. A new economic and social reality forces a new outlook on the factors determining the growth rate of wealth (economic growth), and thus of living standards. This task is undertaken by John Stuart Mill and, at the same time, he reinterprets the powers of the state (it creates the foundations for two economic functions performed by the modern state, i.e. the function of creating legal order and the function of redistribution). Interpreting the tasks of the state, he is in favour of: safeguarding liberties and freedom of economic activity; organisation of employment services for persons deprived

of work; employment control for children, young people and women; financing technical progress important from the point of view of future generations, and, above all, organisation of universal education, in which he finds the tools to fight unemployment and increasing poverty (Mill, 1995, pp. 61–75; Mill, 2012, pp. 103–108; Zagóra-Jonszta, 2016, pp. 96–97). According to Mill, in the new economic reality, an efficient education system plays an important role: “(...) *any well-intentioned and tolerable government may think, without presumption, that it does or ought to possess a degree of cultivation above the average of the community which it rules, and that it should therefore be capable of offering better education and better instruction to the people, than the greater number of them would spontaneously demand. Education, therefore, is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people*” (Mill, 1965, vol. II, p. 798).

According to Mill’s outlook, the non-educated individual (employee) behaves irrationally and when making decisions about excessive reproduction condemns himself to a decline in income and unemployment, and consequently to a lowering of the standard of living, because: “(...) *from indolence, or carelessness, or because people think it fine to pay and ask no questions, three-fourths of those who can afford it give much higher prices than necessary for the things they consume; while the poor often do the same from ignorance and defect of judgment, want of time for searching and making inquiry, and not unfrequently from coercion, open or disguised*” (Mill, 1965, vol. I, p. 583). Therefore, in order to reduce the extent of unemployment and poverty, and thus increase the level of wealth of workers, it is necessary to disseminate elementary education among workers and their children. The introduction of compulsory schooling is associated with the state’s involvement and an increase in public sector expenditure (Kundera, 2014, pp. 131–132).

Mill, modifying his approach to the rights of the liberal state, advocates the evolution of the capitalist system of production towards a system guaranteeing social equality (thus presenting a socialist point of view) and he therefore distinguishes two types of state intervention: authoritative (sovereign) and non-authoritative. In the case of the first type of intervention, he rejects it because the state, by means of prohibitions or orders, restricts the freedom of the economic entity and thus exacerbates social inequalities. However, approves of the second type of intervention because the state, through the information provided, determines the efficiency not only of the individual but also of the entire society and thus affects the conditions for the distribution of already produced wealth (Danowska-Prokop, 2017, p. 137; Mill, 1965, p. Vol. II, p. 787; Mill, 2012, pp. 178–200; Ratajczak, 2008, p. 49).

These representatives of the classic economic thought were the first to bring attention to the relationship between the standard of living of the individual and of the general public, and the education system. That is why they were of the opinion that universal compulsory education would allow the acquisition of new knowledge and raise the competences of employees employed directly in the process of creating

wealth. According to them, an educated and not demoralised worker is more productive in economic and social terms, which has a positive effect on technical progress, division of labour and specialisation. This creates conditions accelerating industrial and technological development (socio-economic development), including the level of wealth of the entire society.

#### MILTON FRIEDMAN'S ASSESSMENT OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the 1970s, after a period of Keynesian economics and a "harmful" policy of boosting the economy by increasing state spending at the expense of raising taxes as well as inflation and unemployment (in the late 1960s, the economies of industrialised countries were falling into recession), liberal economics returned to favour, one of the leading representatives of which was Milton Friedman (founder of the Chicago school, monetarism). Friedman returned to the roots, promoting a classic view not only of the market, the state, technical progress and division of labour, but also of the role of the education system in creating conditions conducive to economic growth, which in turn affects income and standard of living (i.e. determines the quality of life), and ultimately stabilises the socio-political order (Cameron, Neal, 2004, pp. 401–403; Jones, 2002, pp. 597–599, 669–673).

In a new economic and social reality, Friedman refers to the classical concept of the freedom of choice of the individual. According to Friedman, the right to the freedom of choice is the basis for the functioning of a healthy society, both in economic and socio-political terms, because free and rational individuals, working together on a voluntary basis, realise both individual and collective benefits hand in hand. *"A free society releases the energies and abilities of people to pursue their own objectives. It prevents some people from arbitrarily suppressing others. It does not prevent some people from achieving positions of privilege, but so long as freedom is maintained, it prevents those positions of privilege from becoming institutionalized; they are subject to continued attack by other able, ambitious people. Freedom means diversity and also mobility. It preserves the opportunity for today's disadvantaged to become tomorrow's privileged"* (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 142). Friedman's reasoning clearly shows that freedom of choice of an individual in connection with justice condition economic and political freedom, i.e. a free market economy within the capitalist system of production (Friedman, 1993, pp. 21–32). Further: *"Economic freedom is an essential requisite for political freedom. By enabling people to cooperate with one another without coercion or central direction, it reduces the area over which political power is exercised. In addition, by dispersing power, the free market provides an offset to whatever concentration of political power may arise"* (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 11).

Not only does economic freedom allow the individual to freely dispose of his/her own income and assets (in this aspect Friedman takes into account the individual's

freedom to choose education and profession), but it also guarantees the freedom of ownership and exchange without any constraints. It follows that each individual, guided by individual (relatively constant) preferences, strives to realise their own benefits (a direct reference to the smithian concept of homo oeconomicus). “*Each saw his work as a way to get the goods and services he wanted*” (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 20). In contrast, changes in individual preferences depend upon access to information and knowledge, and he therefore advocates an efficient education system that guarantees not only a high level of education regardless of place of residence or social background but which also provides knowledge useful from the perspective of economic needs.

Friedman, accepting the classic view of broadly understood freedom, presents his own view of the state and its role in socio-economic life (Friedman, 1993, pp. 33–43). In Friedman’s view, the state is subjected to the individual, which is associated with the limitation of the rights of this entity, as: “(…) *every accretion of government power for whatever purpose increases the danger that government, instead of serving the great majority of its citizens, will become a means whereby some of its citizens can take advantage of others*” (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 39). On this basis, he reduces the competences of the state (political power) to three tasks: protection of private property, protection of public order and protection of the free market, which is connected with supporting competition. The condition for achieving the desired level of socio-economic development is the functioning of the economy without the participation of government institutions, and therefore Friedman is in favour of replacing high income tax with a fixed tax rate, conducting a stable monetary policy, limiting government administration and granting the president the right to a separate veto (Belka, 1984, pp. 42–48; Friedman, 1993, p. 56; Lityńska, 1999, p. 69; Ptak, 2008, pp. 30–39).

The relationship between freedom of economic activity and economic efficiency is determined by the “efficiency” of the education system, i.e. the level of education adapted to the needs of the economy. According to Friedman, in the American reality, there is a discrepancy between the level of education (knowledge provided) and the needs and expectations of the economy. “*Unfortunately, in recent years our educational record has become tarnished. Parents complain about the declining quality of the schooling their children receive*” (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 168). Friedman therefore speaks openly about the ineffectiveness of education (about the different levels of education) depending on the wealth of parents or place of residence: in the rich suburbs of large cities, the level of education is high, whereas in the case of small towns and rural areas, the level of education is only satisfactory, and the worst situation in this respect is observable in the centres of big cities, where poorer and coloured people live. Therefore, the low level of education (mismatch between knowledge and the needs of the economy) is a result of excessive state interference in the functioning of the education system. The

expansion of administration in education leads to: marginalising the role of parents in school (limiting their impact on the teaching process and content), strengthening the position of the teacher and weakening the incentives encouraging teachers to work more effectively (he advocates Max Gammon's theory of bureaucratic replacement – the administration strives to implement its own benefits).

According to Friedman, the poor condition of public education (low-quality teaching and programs not adapted to the needs of the economy) cannot be remedied with an increase in expenses, because the root of the evil lies in the education system itself, in a faulty organisational formula. Therefore, recognising the organisational shortcomings of the education system, he is in favour of the privatisation of public education. "*As the private market took over, the quality of all schooling would rise so much that even the worst, while it might be relatively lower on the scale, would be better in absolute quality*" (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, p. 189).

In the twentieth-century reality, he approves of the obligation of universal access to schools, and therefore supports the so-called school voucher at primary and secondary levels, the value of which would cover the average cost of teaching in each school. Thanks to school vouchers (the possibility of choosing a school), students would receive a better product (higher level of education), because there would be an element of competition between public and private schools. However, in the case of higher education, he proposes the introduction of an alternative financing system in relation to government funding, i.e. a system of loans (the state's investment in a student) (Friedman M., Friedman R., 1988, pp. 202–206; Friedman, 1993 p. 50; Ptak, 2008, pp. 71–73).

## CONCLUSIONS

Development processes, initiated by the industrial and technical revolution, trigger changes in the sphere of production and in the organisation of society. There are twofold effects of industrialisation:

- firstly, it contributes to the economic rationalisation of the individual's activities,
- secondly, it stimulates the demand for skilled workers.

Both effects lead to an increase in production, and thus to an increase in the wealth of the nation and better satisfaction of needs (improvement in the standard of living).

However, as the capitalist relations of production develop, internal contradictions between freedom and equality increase (social inequalities aggravate), and for them to be resolved, the need to cooperate with the state arises. The state, supporting individual freedom, plays the role of an active social reformer through the organisation of education. The efficiency of the education system determines the pace of economic growth and the level of wealth of the whole society.



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### Summary

The paper presents the attitudes of the English classics, i.e. Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, as well as the neoliberal Milton Friedman, to education as a tool supporting the process of division of labour, and thus having a positive impact on the nation's wealth (national income) and standard of living, not only of individuals but of whole society as well. The aim of the study is to discuss the representatives of the classic economic thought and Milton Friedman's idea of education as a tool for improving living conditions. The method of describing and reviewing the literature of the subject was used in the paper.

In the reality of the free market economy, knowledge and skills as well as the activity, creativity and entrepreneurship of an individual determine individual success, and thus translate into a standard of living. However, with the spread of the capitalist system of production and the deepening of the process of division of labour (specialisation), a universal and public education system, financed by public and private funds hand in hand, plays an increasingly important role in improving the standard of living of the individual and of the general public. Today, the efficiency of the education system (easier access to an appropriate level of education) determines the wealth of society and the position of the state in the global economy.

*Keywords:* classical economics, liberalism, living standards, education, labour.

## Oświata versus poziom życia w rozważaniach klasyków i współczesnego neoliberalą

### Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje stosunek angielskich klasyków, tj. Adama Smitha i Johna Stuarta Milla, a także neoliberalą Milтона Friedmana, do oświaty (edukacji) jako narzędzia wspomagającego proces podziału pracy, a tym samym oddziałującego pozytywnie na bogactwo narodu (dochód narodowy) i poziom życia nie tylko jednostki, ale i całego społeczeństwa. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie spojrzenia klasyków myśli ekonomicznej i Milтона Friedmana na edukację jako narzędzie poprawy warunków bytowych. Przy pisaniu artykułu posłużono się metodą opisu i przeglądu literatury przedmiotu.

W realiach gospodarki wolnorynkowej wiedza i umiejętności oraz aktywność, kreatywność i przedsiębiorczość jednostki decydują o indywidualnym sukcesie, a więc przekładają się na po-

ziom życia. Jednak wraz z upowszechnieniem kapitalistycznego systemu produkcji i pogłębieniem procesu podziału pracy (specjalizacji) coraz większą rolę w podwyższaniu poziomu życia jednostki i ogółu społeczeństwa odgrywa powszechny i publiczny system edukacyjny, finansowany równolegle ze środków publicznych, jak i prywatnych. Współcześnie sprawność systemu edukacyjnego (ułatwiony dostęp do odpowiedniego poziomu kształcenia) decyduje o zamożności społeczeństwa i pozycji państwa w globalnej gospodarce.

*Słowa kluczowe:* ekonomia klasyczna, liberalizm, warunki bytowe, edukacja, praca.

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