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A BRIEF HISTORY OF PERMANENT BLACK

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Q: Most topnotch economists teach economics and write mathematical economics comprehensible only to their peers. By contrast, The Retreat of Democracy, your third book of popular essays (following Economic Graffiti and Of People, Of Places), shows literary elegance, a philospher's wit, and an uncommon ability to communicate economic ideas to newspaper readers, suggesting that your intellectual links are with left-leaning economic philosophers such as Sen, Keynes, and Krugman. Who do you see as your major icons? And have you consciously forged your trajectory to be much more than that of a professional economist?

A: The inability to communicate is so often treated as a hallmark of scholarship that I hope I am not being foolish in treating your observation as praise. Thank you. Thank you also for associating me with these three economists for whom I have great admiration. I do consider myself left-leaning, while being fully aware that the ‘establishment’ left would not consider me so. I find it very difficult to owe allegiance to a dogma or a party line. I owe my intellectual awakening to Bertrand Russell and revere his irreverence for tradition. My most major icon may well be David Hume. I grew up on and have endless admiration for Rabindranath Tagore, though not as a philosopher. My preference is for deductive philosophy and Tagore’s was far from that. But with his multiple talents, ranging from literarily all genres of writing to expressionist art, when expressionism was only beginning to appear in Europe, he was iconic indeed. I don’t think I have consciously forged any trajectory. Excepting these last 15 months in government, I have been completely wayward in pursuing whatever my heart desired. I know that that can lead people to ruin. I have just been lucky … thus far.

Q: Among the most captivating things about your popular essays is the ability to reveal links between economic theory, political problems, and everyday lived realities in India. A brilliant essay shows neighbourhood street game strategies in Kolkata underpinning the sorts of games politicians play in the arena of international relations and within the United Nations. Others explain Indian labour laws, trade policies in relation to the WTO, alternative voting systems which can pre-empt hung parliaments, and the impact of cultural norms on economic functioning in Norway and India. Could you tell us something about your upbringing and early life which seem to have predisposed you so

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AN INTERVIEW WITH KAUSHIK BASU

KAUSHIK BASU’S book
The Retreat of Democracy
(permanent black paperback)

comprises scintillatingly readable and unexpectedly witty essays. Economists are usually dry-as-dust scholars dabbling in statistics and equations beyond our ken. How come Kaushik Basu is quite a different sort of economist? This interview provides a picture of someone with a quite unusually wide range of interests:
A: Where I come from is difficult to answer. So let me get over with the physical part of it. I was born in a small, over-crowded, joint-family home in North Kolkata. A few years later, as my father’s legal career took off, we moved to a spacious home in the southern part of the city. I stayed there all through my school years and moved to Delhi only to go to college—St. Stephen’s. Despite this relatively sedentary start, I am lucky that I find myself easily at home wherever I happen to be. I don’t know how it came to be this way but I consider myself a natural anthropologist. I love to watch the customs, follies, and foibles of human beings. I have written somewhere that I was born in a setting to get to which many an anthropologist would spend huge amounts of time and money. I was lucky I got there free of cost. The huge cast of characters around me—loving, warm and displaying a fascinating range of social and cultural mores and every endearing eccentricity you can think of—may have been a factor stirring the amateur anthropologist in me. But the number of kids born in North Kolkata in the early fifties, when India’s population growth was at its peak, was huge and on doing a head-count of anthropologists it is obvious that my explanation is not too compelling.

Q: Martha Nussbaum says your appointment as Chief Economic Advisor in India suggests “the real empowerment of good intellectuals” in the country. Yet given that, first, the dominant interest of economists serving the Indian state is GDP and ‘growth’, rather than ‘capabilities’ (a term associated with Nussbaum and Sen), and second, that such empowerment also seems to function as a façade behind which to cover up incredible levels of political corruption, do you feel like a fish out of water? Or are you in your element?

A: In the larger political setting and the rough and tumble of graft and greed, I do feel a fish out of water. But I have been lucky that most of my immediate dealings are with people I respect a lot. Once one is in the belly of the beast called government, it quickly becomes evident that the majority of human beings at the helm of politics and policymaking are decent people and committed professionals. But one also learns from this that it takes only a few to vitiate the whole atmosphere. Fortunately, the challenge of designing good policy is so exciting that I do get a lot of adrenalin rush from my current job as Chief Economic Adviser. At the same time I miss my academic life—both the teaching and the life on the cutting-edge of research acutely—and, though I am enjoying my present life on the frontiers of policymaking immensely, I hope to get back to academe before long.

Q: You’ve been a professor in the Delhi School of Economics and at Cornell. What have been some of the differences in your teaching experiences here and there?

A: They were surprisingly similar. The best students at both places were first rate. They kept you on your toes, made you give your best. Both institutes were totally egalitarian. The treatment was the same whether you were a starting lecturer or senior professor.
Ideas propounded by either could be challenged, admired, or castigated. The one advantage the Delhi School had was the coffee house, where we spent hours, chatting, developing new ideas, and also wasting plenty of time. This had no equivalent at Cornell. On the other hand, a pleasure I found at Cornell in large measure was PhD students. Because of the large exodus of students after the MA, Delhi had a very slender PhD program. In my 17 years there, I supervised only 2 students. At Cornell, I supervised 18 students in 15 years. Working closely with teams of PhD students was one of the great joys at Cornell.

Q: Could you list five or six books outside professional economics that have meant a lot to you, and which you'd recommend to all your friends?

A: If I had to recommend six books, these would be it.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. There are few lives so miserable and so majestic at the same time.

—Catherine Tait's *My Father Bertrand Russell*. Though if you were to read only one book on Russell, it would be a toss up between this and Russell's own Autobiography.

—Any one P.G. Wodehouse.

—Manohar Shyam Joshi's *Tta Professor*.

—Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Or maybe his *The Castle*, though since I lost my copy before I reached the end of the book, I never found out if the Castle actually exists.

—in case you can read Bengali, I would highly recommend, Sharatchandra Chatterjee's *Srikanta*, especially volume 1.

And please note that I did not include in this list the *Economic Survey 2010-11*, even though by the criterion of "it meant a lot to me" it fits the bill for it swallowed up the better part of my life these past few months.