



President Robert Zimmer
The University of Chicago
5801 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

October 17, 2008

Dear President Zimmer:

I had hoped to offer my views of the controversy surrounding the Milton Friedman Institute at Wednesday's meeting of the Senate, but since there were many more of us who wished to speak than could be accommodated in the available time, I was unable to do so. Like many of those present, I was disappointed in the constrained format, which struck me as needlessly defensive and anti-deliberative, and I hope that there will be more opportunities for faculty-wide discussion of this important issue. Meanwhile, however, I offer you another three (or perhaps four) more minutes' worth of reflections, first about the name of the Milton Friedman Institute, and, second, about its mission and place in the University.

Although my own concerns about the Milton Friedman Institute have never been centered on its name, I found myself more rather than less troubled by that issue in the wake of Wednesday's discussion.

I sincerely believe that my colleagues in the Department of Economics intended this Institute to honor Friedman's service to the University, as well as his scholarly example, and that they were not interested in using the name to announce the creation of a right-wing think-tank. But the problem is not with what the founders of the Institute may have intended. The problem is precisely that there *are* many "Milton Friedmans"—including the Milton Friedman known to academic economists, *and* the Milton Friedman beloved of some libertarians and of some conservatives, *and* the Milton Friedman reviled in Latin America as a supporter of brutal authoritarian regimes—and when it comes to the symbolic act of christening an Institute, these many Milton Friedmans come as a package, whether we like it or not.

Naming an Institute after any figure whose reputation is simultaneously scholarly and ideological is thus a sticky business, because we can't neutralize the resonances we don't like just by saying that they weren't what we meant. Any such Institute seems to me to bear a special burden, not merely to disavow those associations, but to show, in its institutional design, governance, and activities, that it will affirmatively resist the ideological dogmatism that many observers will, rightly or wrongly, expect to come with the name. But perhaps it would be best to avoid using such names for research centers altogether, and to find a different way of honoring Friedman, if it can still be done.

I have just suggested, in effect, that the problem with the Institute's name is not that it is evidence of ideological bias, but that it reflects an unfortunate insensitivity on the part of the Institute's founders to the way Friedman's name would signify outside the world of academic economics. My larger concern about the Milton Friedman Institute has a similar shape.

Much has been said about certain passages in the Milton Friedman Institute's founding proposal that suggest a disturbing degree of "free-market" dogmatism, and about the need for the University to maintain political and ideological neutrality, in line with the principles of the Kalven report. This is an important issue, and I have great respect for the Kalven report's principles—as well as for its caveats. But when it comes to the activities of a single research center, I am somewhat less concerned about bias than about blind spots, less concerned about ensuring strict *neutrality* than about ensuring *independence*. Domains of academic inquiry always takes things for granted, things that may be controversial in other fields, or, sometimes, in politics. The real question, for me, is: are we taking the right things for granted, and for the right reasons?

One legitimate complaint about the Institute, I think, is that what *it* takes for granted—for instance, about the pervasiveness of markets and their place in society, or about the nature of "value"—corresponds too precisely to what is taken for granted within a single discipline in the social sciences. Indeed, I don't see why it was necessary to create a new academic unit with exactly the same intellectual jurisdiction as the existing Department of Economics: although it may be true that not every Institute needs to serve *every* Department, I am hard-pressed to think of another Institute that is so obviously a satellite of a *single* Department—and one that, notwithstanding Provost Rosenbaum's assignment of Economics and the Social Sciences Division to separate financial "buckets," now appears to be the only Department in the Social Sciences and Humanities to be dipping into the well with two hands. But more importantly, the perfect overlap of Economics and the Milton Friedman Institute seems to me to squander the cross-disciplinary potential of a big initiative like this—and at a critical historical moment, when one might have expected the University of Chicago to be more ambitious and iconoclastic.

How did such an institutional redundancy make it through our many layers of administrative vetting? One explanation suggests itself, an explanation that has ramifications well beyond this particular decision, and which is thus the source of my deepest concern about the Milton Friedman Institute. Every once in a while, in my department, we pass over an applicant for a faculty position because we judge that he or she is doing exclusively "method-driven research," letting the contents of his or her toolbox determine the questions he or she asks. I worry that the Milton Friedman Institute as currently configured is an example of "development-driven institution-building," in which big decisions about the intellectual agenda of the university are determined by somebody's sense of where the donors are and what they are likely to support. Not determined by the donors themselves, mind you: my point here is *not* about whether or not million-dollar contributors to the Milton Friedman Institute will be able to exert influence on its agenda, though that's also a vital issue. But determined by the administrators and governing bodies of the University, who I fear may have judged that the development opportunities presented by this proposal—despite, or perhaps because, of its limitation to the field of economics—were too great to pass up.

I do not mean to diminish the importance of development. I know donors put food on our tables. I have no illusions about the social preconditions of intellectual inquiry. But in my view, part of what it means to be a university is that we refuse to be quite so smoothly integrated into the social context upon which we nevertheless depend. In the same way that, in the classroom, we refuse to think of ourselves merely as producers of credentialed labor, in our research we refuse to measure the value of ideas only by how much financial support we can drum up for them. Or, to put this in the terms of your opening remarks on Wednesday: we may work hard to convert ambitious ideas into generous support from our donors, but we refuse to *measure* the ambition of an idea primarily by its expected capacity to produce surplus value. These refusals create a fragile space of relatively independent inquiry, and that relative independence is absolutely critical to our credibility as producers of knowledge—especially when it comes to knowledge about the economy.

I realize that in saying this I am urging the University to make fundraising more rather than less challenging for itself at a moment when we need all the help we can get. A differently constituted Institute that brought together disciplinary economists, historians, philosophers, and anthropologists, for instance, might have been a harder sell, not least because the participants in such a project would have had to do a lot of work to forge a *lingua franca* in which they could communicate. The payoffs might have been deferred, might have taken more radically unexpected directions, might have been harder for donors to recognize. But I don't think there's any way around this, unless we want to give up on some fundamental commitments about who we are and what we do. Universities are places in which it's possible to bite the hands that feed us; and we are condemned to raise money not just by predicting what will sell, but also by persuading potential donors that they should want to risk being bitten.

In short, the Milton Friedman Institute didn't need to be strictly neutral: it needed some teeth.

I thank you for your attention and wish you the best for the Autumn.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Markell', with a stylized, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Patchen Markell

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cc: Provost Thomas Rosenbaum
Professor Bruce Lincoln, The Committee for Open Research on Economy & Society