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Column: Outsourcing is an issue of moral economics

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By Djavad Salehi-Isfahani

I am glad to read a reply ("Economic thought places too much value in consumerism," CT, Feb. 17) to my column on outsourcing, "Outsourcing benefits U.S. and international economies" (CT, Feb. 13) even though the author does not like neoclassical economics or outsourcing, for it helps this important discussion go one step further.

Since the point of my article was not to promote any school of economic thought, and in any case I do not identify with the type of economics the author describes, I will only address his criticism of outsourcing.

I agree with the author that some trade may have increased child labor and environmental degradation in poorer countries. But what I find interesting about outsourcing of high tech jobs is precisely that it does not have those drawbacks. It offers moral clarity on the complex issue of world trade because it prevents defenders of privilege from hiding their motives (and I am certainly not implying that the author is one).

Whereas opponents of globalization in the United States find many a comrade among third world intellectuals, opponents of outsourcing do not. Their message is not layered with concern about the horrors of child labor, sweatshops and environmental degradation.

Indeed, outsourcing opponents can be heard saying, "having benefited greatly from free trade with the poor nations, we are unwilling to make any sacrifice that would help an Indian engineer get the full benefits of her education. We can shop for the cheapest oil or gadget around the world, but she cannot offer her services to the highest bidder."

Never mind that our loss may be only temporary while her gain may transform her life (and that of her younger sister who can now afford to go to school). If the economics of outsourcing may appear ambiguous, its ethics are rather clear.

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Speaking of ethics, I will not go for the moral high ground by claiming to pass the “gut test” that the author proposes, which was to give up tenure to allow others to educate Tech students. Nor will I ask the author if he is willing to give up all the items he owns that are not made in the United States.

I would, however, follow his nice example and consider the right of Tech students to be taught by foreign faculty. If tenure were a way to reduce competition from foreign faculty, that is, force students here to put up with mediocre instruction just because the faculty are — to use his words — “middle aged, with children in college and a mortgage,” then I would certainly argue that it should be abolished. I am sure Virginia taxpayers would have none of it either.

I may add here that all parts of academia — and economics is no exception — face at least as much foreign competition as any other line of business.

The field in which those who produce ideas compete, though perhaps not level, is wide open. Scientists from India and China compete freely for space in our leading publications and conferences, as well as for our jobs, yet not a whisper heard from U.S. academics to stop the competition.

Anyone who has studied economics would know that this is not so much magnanimity as the realization that the open field is the reason why the American academics are the best in the world.

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