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Mark Blaug: A Rebel with Many Causes

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MARK BLAUG: REBEL WITH MANY CAUSES

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CENTER FOR THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY
AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

Introduction to *Mark Blaug: Rebel with Many Causes*

by Marcel Boumans and Matthias Klaes

Mark Blaug died on 18 November, 2011, at home in Tavistock (UK). This sad news came to us by a sober message on the SHOE list, written by Roger Backhouse, a few days later. An intellectual 'giant' had died. From his first publications in 1956 onwards, he had written important, often pioneering contributions to economic history, economic methodology, economics of education and development economics, economics of the arts, economic theory, and history of economic thought. Mark was indeed 'not only an economist' (Blaug 1994b).

To commemorate his ideas and the influence they had on many of us a Memorial Conference was held on March 28, 2012 at the Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Economics (EIPE), Rotterdam (NL). In parallel, on March 26 in the same week, the Scottish Centre for Economic Methodology (SCEME) hosted a seminar at the University of Glasgow in tribute to his work. It was fitting in many ways that these two events should commemorate Mark's legacy in the Netherlands and the UK as the two countries Mark regarded as his home, sharing his time between them during the past two decades. Equally, it was fitting that EIPE and SCEME should honour him in his way given his longstanding and crucial involvement in both institutions.

For both conferences we invited old and new friends and colleagues to talk, discuss, and argue his ideas and their legacy in a way that we were sure Mark would have loved to counter. The volume gathers contributions arising from both events.

This volume however will not contain a biography or obituary. If you would like to have a good understanding of Mark's life and ideas, we sincerely recommend his own unsurpassed 'autobiographical reflections of a historian of economic thought' (Blaug 1994b). Another entertaining source is the interview he gave, 'A conversation with Mark Blaug', recorded in 2007, while he was an Erskine Visitor at the Economics Department of the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand (Fountain 2007). A most recent and complete biographical sketch is Backhouse's obituary for *HOPE* (2012). As the editors of the present volume, we felt there was little to add to these that would not also be borne out by the various contributions collected here.

Mark was not only a 'voracious' reader (Blaug 1994b, p. 16), but also 'wrote faster than God could read' (Maas 2012, p. 3). Whatever subject he was researching, his ongoing reading went together

with editing annotated bibliographies and anthologies, while making (often pioneering) contributions to the field in question. Sometimes this process of reading and research culminated in a textbook. For example, before he began to publish his own research in 1965 in the new field of 'Economics of Education',¹ he first edited an annotated bibliography (1964). While his research in the economics of education accumulated, the stack of his anthologies grew proportionally (1966a, 1968, 1969, 1970a). After only seven years of having entered this field he published the landmark textbook, *An Introduction to the Economics of Education* (1970b), that remained an influential text and could be found on reading lists all the way into the 1980s.

Another testimony of his vast literacy were his reference books: *Great Economists before Keynes* (1986) and *Great Economists since Keynes* (1985) and the Elgar *Pioneers in Economics* Series (1991-1992) in 43 volumes. Like his annotations in the bibliographies of economics of education, the entries of the *Great Economists* volumes 'provide evaluations of their subjects' work, not simply descriptions of what they did' (Backhouse 2001, p. 19), and were written by a scholar who throughout his career remained attuned to the need for appraisal and not just reconstruction of the developing body of economic thought.

As evidence for his impressive production as author and editor, we also include Mark's bibliography. But we hasten to say that we do not claim it to be complete nor correct. Mark's list of publications is simply too long and we were not able to check every outlet in which Mark might possibly have published. The essential difference with a bibliography Mark would have produced is that ours does not have annotations. Mark fortunately annotated his own work when it appeared in one of his own bibliographies. Here are two of the earliest examples, to have an impression of how they look like:

On Blaug (1966b)

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of education in the transformation of an economy based on self-sufficient subsistence agriculture to an economy based on market transactions, with particular reference to the English-speaking countries of Africa South of the Sahara and North of the Republic of South Africa. It analyses the nature of the problem, reviews the existing evidence, particular quantitative evidence, proposes future research to fill the gaps in current knowledge, and concludes with a few policy proposals based on what we now know about the interrelationship between education and economic development in an African context. The role of formal education is carefully distinguished from the role of

informal education (literacy campaigns, agricultural extension, community development, and the like). (Blaug 1964, p. 65)

On Blaug (1965)²

This bibliography covers the literature in English that explores the role of education in encouraging the indigenous population of Africa and Asia to seek wage employment and to sell produce to the market. It is broken down into six sections: measurement of the subsistence economy; case studies of subsistence economics in transition; social change and the impact of cash economies; empirical evidence of educational standards in the cash economy; the role of formal education in transition; and the role of informal education in the transaction. (Blaug 1964, p. 95)

In an account of Mark as a historian of economic thought, Backhouse (2001, p. 35) gives an apt description of his 'major impact on the history of economic thought' summarized in five characteristics:

1. He was an avid reader and had acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of economics and the history of economic thought. Where necessary, as in the case of classical economics, this extends also to the relevant history.
2. He formed an opinion on most of the controversial issues in the history of economic thought and given his wide reading was able to defend it vigorously.
3. He always approached his work with a clear idea of the questions that need to be asked.
4. Underlying all his work, from *Ricardian Economics* to his recent protests against general equilibrium theory, has been a concern with the all-important question of the basis on which theories are accepted or rejected. This is both a methodological and a historical question.
5. He had been prepared openly to change his mind when confronted with convincing arguments, both in relation to his applied work and to his historical work.³

Besides this characterization, Backhouse (p. 17) provides another complementary and partly overlapping one:

- (1) Mark was is impatient about minor details;
- (2) Mark had opinions on most things and was prepared to exaggerate when this was necessary to make a point effectively;⁴
- (3) Mark had changed his mind on some important questions and did not try to conceal this.

These characteristics not only describe Mark's impact as a historian of economic thought, they also provide an apt characterization of his broader scholarship. Backhouse (2001, p. 35) added to this,

rightly so as we believe, that Mark 'remained at heart an economist, seeking to make a contribution to economics'.

Underlying this characterization, however, there is a more complex personality.⁵ This was first sharply observed by Henry D. Dickinson, when reviewing the first British edition of the *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (also quoted in Backhouse 2001, p. 17): 'Here the author shows a certain division within himself between head and heart. Intellectually, he is an absolutist; but in many passages his words suggest that, emotionally, he has a strong sympathy with the relativist position' (Dickinson 1965, p. 170). Several contributions in this volume, and Mark himself in his later publications, hint at the gradual shift he made across his life from an absolutist to a relativist position. 'In due course I have had second thoughts about the choice between these two viewpoints and the terms in which I posed that choice' (Blaug 1996, p. xvii). The choice between these positions became a choice between 'rational reconstruction' and 'historical reconstruction', and 'I now see merits in both standpoints' (p. xvii). Which position he became to favour was made more explicit when he rephrased these two different standpoints by using Archilochus's distinction between foxes and hedgehogs 'The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing': 'I used to love hedgehogs but those were "my salad days when I was green in judgement". Now I prefer foxes – Smith over Ricardo, Mill over Senior, Marshall over Walras' (Blaug 1996, p. xviii).

But a personality like Mark is not that easily analysed, not even by himself. To avoid psychological analysis of the kind that he, Popperian at heart, came to abandon, let us look at Mark's revealed preferences. One look at his bibliography is sufficient to establish that he has been a fox all along. But as a fox he always had a high admiration of hedgehogs, though his most favourite hedgehog kept changing. In sequence, and associated with the different phases of his intellectual life, it was: Henry George, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, David Ricardo, and Karl Popper. The attraction of these hedgehogs were their great overarching ideas, and we cannot resist in this context quoting from Mark's temporary conversion to Marx:

it was the encyclopedic range of Marxist theory, the sense that there was a universal science of society and indeed a philosophy of history as well as a philosophy of nature; whether it was the latest political election result, or the causes of the French revolution, or the overthrow of the matriarchy in ancient Greece, or why Rembrandt was so partial to chiaroscuro, or why Beethoven's last piano sonata Op. 102 consisted of only two movements, or what Goethe meant by the ending of *Faust*, it could all be explained by Marxism. (Blaug 1994b, p. 12)

The first edition of Mark's *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (1962) includes a chapter on methodology, 'A Methodological Postscript', which starts with four big epistemological and methodological questions: 'What do economists know? How much does economics explain? What are the principles upon which economic theories have been accepted or rejected? What features have characterized enduring economic ideas?' (p. 604). The first three questions are the standard questions with which you can open any textbook on economic methodology, including his own. The last one though is not. While the first three questions came to be tackled in one way or another, the fourth – for Mark the most fascinating question – remained an unresolved enigma. The first epigraph of the *Economic Theory in Retrospect* illustrates this interest in enduring ideas:⁶ 'Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know. T.S. Eliot'.

Mark loved great ideas, and that love was as much intellectual as it was emotional. Backhouse (2012) – again – puts it very aptly:

The other reason for the strength of his opinions was that he loved ideas and could develop enthusiasms for ideas he thought were important. In his youth he had become an enthusiast for Henry George and then Karl Marx. He then became an enthusiast for general equilibrium theory and human capital theory. All of the Gods failed but he never lost the enthusiasm for debating ideas". We will miss his enduring enthusiasm which was a stimulus for many of us. (Backhouse 2012, p. 580)

This volume contains contributions by Roger Backhouse, Marcel Boumans, Erwin Dekker & Christian Handke, Victor Ginsburgh, Geoffrey Hodgson, Richard Lipsey, Harro Maas, and Jack Vromen based on their presentations in Rotterdam or Glasgow. Unfortunately not everyone was able to attend at such short notice; papers by John Davis, Wade Hands, David Laidler and Andrea Salanti, were submitted at a later stage and are also included. Beside these scholarly papers we also received personal appreciations from Bruce Caldwell, John Maloney and Thomas Mayer, offering personal vignettes of how Mark had influenced them. In addition to these, Ruth Towse shares with us, as a daily witness, an intimate account of Mark's work practice. We are very pleased that Alan Peacock accepted our invitation to write a preface to this volume.

With Mark's passing the debates that he was involved in have come to an end in one sense, but in another sense they carry on. This is perhaps best exemplified by Richard Lipsey's contribution in

which he surveys all the ‘contentious issues’ he and Mark liked to discuss and expected to be around with us for a long time. At the loss of one’s interlocutor, there always remains the regret of missing the chance of finalizing a stimulating debate. David Laidler attempts to finalize the discussion he had with Mark on the question ‘why is the quantity theory the oldest surviving theory in economics?’ (Blaug 1995). Geoffrey Hodgson suggests a more sophisticated normative evolutionary philosophy of science instead of Mark’s favorite Popperianism (Blaug 1994a), and Jack Vromen argues for the merits of evolutionary game-theory, which Mark considered to be another example of ‘ugly’ formalism (Blaug 1997). But all three are very aware that if Mark would still be with us, the last word would be his, not theirs.⁷

Harro Maas, Roger Backhouse and John Davis discuss Mark’s evolving attitude towards a ‘fox approach’ and a ‘hedgehog approach’. More specifically, Maas analyses Mark’s changing views on rational and historical reconstructions, Backhouse explains Mark’s changing ideas on Sraffian economics and general equilibrium economics, and Davis discusses Mark’s reversion in thinking about the historiography of economics. Marcel Boumans and Andrea Salanti both argue that methodology itself should not be considered as a ‘fixed point’ but as knowledge that evolves through time. Boumans argues that this view would keep Mark close to Lakatos’s combined historiography and philosophy and Salanti shows that this view allows for a methodological reflection of practice with rules, even if they change.

While Mark’s contributions to the economics of education are well known in applied labour economics beyond their immediate field of origin, his role in the establishment of cultural economics is perhaps less widely appreciated. Two chapters account for his influence in creating this new field in economics. Victor Ginsburgh discusses Mark’s two incursions into the economics of the arts and into cultural economics which contributed to shaping these new fields. Christian Handke and Erwin Dekker show how Mark in his contributions to cultural economics ‘practiced what he preached’ in that his preached methodology was applied in his assessment of cultural economics. In a similar vein, the last chapter by Wade Hands employs Mark’s methodological approach to assess a current methodological paper which in its ambition is similar to Friedman’s famous essay on the methodology of positive economics.

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