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THE DEVELOPMENT ECONOMIST AS HISTORIAN  
OF ECONOMICS: THE CASE OF WILLIAM J.  
BARBER

by

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***The development economist as historian of economics: the  
case of William J. Barber***

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**Abstract.** The paper shows how William Barber's background as a development economist influenced his research agenda in the history of economic thought, in terms of the questions he asked and the way he approached them. The links between the history of economic theory and of policy-making are highlighted, as well as Barber's investigation of the engagement of British economists with India's economic matters throughout the time span of the English East India Company.

**Key words.** William J. Barber, development economics, history of economics, policy-making, classical economics

**JEL classification.** B12, B30

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## **I On golden ages in the history of economics and in development economics**

In December 1968 Craufurd Goodwin, Joseph Spengler and Robert Smith organized at Duke University a Symposium on the History of Economic Thought to discuss invited papers that would provide the initial flow of manuscripts for the first issues of *History of Political Economy*. The program included a paper by William Barber (1925-2016) about James Mill and economic policy in India, published in the inaugural issue of *HOPE*. That was also Barber's first paper in the history of economics, having focused his research since the mid 1950s on economic development, particularly economic dualism à la Lewis in Africa (see e.g. Barber 1959; 1961a, b; 1970). Around the time of his Mill paper Barber definitely shifted his research agenda from economic development to history of economic thought, although development economics remained in the background.

Barber was already known to historians of thought, due to his 1967 successful textbook *A History of Economic Thought*, an outgrowth of the course he taught on that subject at Wesleyan University since his arrival in 1957. As Barber (1998, p. 182) recalled, the book structure was inspired by W. Arthur Lewis's (1954) distinction – advanced in his seminal restatement and application of classical economics to economic development – between different “master models” of production and distribution throughout the history of economics (see Boianovsky 2018a, 2019). Earlier that year, in January 1968, Barber and Goodwin were the “two American visitors” who attended the first Conference on the History of Economic Thought, organized by Donald Winch (with R.D. Collison Blacks' assistance) at the University of Sussex (England). On that occasion Goodwin announced, to a largely skeptical

audience, his plans for a journal devoted to the history of economics (Coats 1983, pp. 304-06; Winch 2010, pp. 10-11).

The Sussex conference and the Durham symposium marked the beginning of the end of the “golden age” in the history of economic thought (HET), which had prevailed since the interwar period, when economists were committed to understanding economic problems through the use of HET as an analytical device instead of a separate sub-discipline as has become the case since the 1970s (Goodwin 2008; Winch, op. cit.). The “golden age” of HET partially overlapped with the period of emergence of development economics in its modern form after the Second World War, sometimes called “high development theory” (Krugman 1993). Together with Keynesian economics and macroeconomic planning, development economics played a major role in the expanding of the economic profession and of the range of economic policy in the postwar period (see Backhouse 2002, chapter 13). Barber belonged to a genre of historians of thought coming from development economics or with strong interest in that field.

Duke economist Joseph Spengler exemplified well the heuristic use of HET in the study of economic development and growth, particularly in connection with demography, his area of expertise (see Sobel 1983). This comes out, for instance, in Spengler’s two chapters in the collection on *Theories of Economic Growth* (Hoselitz 1960), which assembled essays on old and new approaches to development and growth. He would contribute a paper about Gustav Cassel and population economics to the *HOPE* inaugural issue (Spengler 1969). The German émigré Henry Spiegel was another case in point. Upon migrating to the United States, he spent a year in Brazil studying the political economy of development of that country (Spiegel 1949). A few years later he produced one of the first historical surveys of theories of economic

development (Spiegel 1955), which shifted his research agenda toward HET (see Moss 1998). Albert Hirschman was another German émigré who – after extensive influential work in development economics since the 1950s – produced, upon interaction with Quentin Skinner and Donald Winch who were visiting at Princeton, an essay on the intellectual history of the relation between economic performance and political systems and beliefs, among other contributions to HET (Hirschman 1977; see Adelman 2012, chapter 16).

Flourishing 1950s development economics provided the background for Collison Black's (1953, 1960) in depth examination of the English classical approach to Irish 19<sup>th</sup> century economic and social conditions – under the guidance of trade and development economist Jacob Viner, an outstanding representative of the “golden age” of HET (Black 1960, pp. v and xiii). Moreover, argued Black (1972), the lessons of 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish experience were relevant for the development economics of the 1960s and 1970s. Barber's 1969 *HOPE* paper, and especially its sequel in the form of his 1975 book on *British Economic Thought and India, 1600-1858*, was similarly informed, as conveyed by its subtitle *A Study in the Development Economics* and by its opening statement that “this study is an essay in the history of development economics – and an essay on some themes in the development of economics” (Barber 1975, p. 1). Barber shared with some of his contemporary fellow historians of economics (Black, Coats, Goodwin, Winch) a concern about HET as an investigation of the relation of theory and analysis to economic policy. Indeed, that was announced as a main goal of *HOPE* and justification of “political” in the journal title (Goodwin, Spengler and Smith 1969, p. 1); Bob Coats (1969, p. 14) highlighted it as a research

priority. *HOPE* first issue was partly planned as a showcase for that, including Barber's Mill paper.<sup>1</sup>

In his assessment of the first decade of *HOPE*, Coats (1983, p. 14) reported that not many papers had been published in 1969-1980 on the relationship between the history of economic theory and policy, but called attention to a few books addressing the theme, headed by Barber (1975).<sup>2</sup> Years later, Phyllis Deane (1991, pp. 39-40) saw Barber's book on British economists and India as representative of a rising empirical historiography concerned with bringing into "sharp focus the actual operational contexts within which specific economic theories, analyses and policy prescriptions have developed and with which they have interacted". By that time, Barber had extended his investigation of the links between economic theory and policy-making to 20<sup>th</sup> century American history, as shown by his book about Herbert Hoover, followed by another one on the Roosevelt era (Barber 1985, 1996).

## **II From Africa to India with a little help from Lewis and Myrdal**

During the two academic years 1949-51 Barber was a graduate student at Oxford University. He came back to Oxford in 1955 to work on his doctoral dissertation, which involved field research in Central Africa, published a few years later (Barber 1961a). His thesis's topic and his research agenda for the next 15 years were decisively influence by his meeting with development economist Arthur Lewis, who gave a seminar at Nuffield College, *en route* to his 1954 article on economic dualism.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that, like Barber, Goodwin was interested in the development and application of economic ideas in Africa (Goodwin 1967).

<sup>2</sup> The list included books by S. Ambirajan, B. Gordon, B. Hilton, S. Howson and D. Winch, and F.W. Fetter, all published between 1978 and 1980.

In his *JHET* autobiographical piece, Barber (1998, p. 181) recollected that “a man whom I met on first hand on only one occasion ... was to have a major influence on my thinking ... I still regard the model W. Arthur Lewis presented [in 1954] ... as one of the truly path-breaking contributions to the literature on economic development (even though I took exception to it in points of detail)”.<sup>3</sup> Barber welcomed Lewis’s call for revisiting classical economics as a main foundation of development economics. For his 1961 book, and a number of article on the economic development of African countries written in the 1950s and 1960s, Barber has been regarded as “the most prominent exponent of economic dualism in Central Africa” (Clarke 2012, p. 22), even though his analysis of African dualism has been criticized in Marxian quarters (Arrighi 1970).

Barber’s 1967 HET textbook for undergraduate students, one of the first of its kind, was not designed as an overall survey of the history of economics, but as a selective discussion of distinct “master models” (classical, Marxian, neo-classical and Keynesian) in four parts, partly under the influence of Lewis (1954). The focus on those schools of thought was justified by their perpetual relevance, as the ideas they contain have “long outlived their authors”, even if current economic issues are distinct from those that motivated their formulation. According to Barber (1967, p. 9), “few things on this earth approach immortality so closely as a logically taut set of economic ideas”. Following on that starting-point, all chapters on individual authors include sections on economic policy, and each part features a postscript on modern adaptations and changes related to the different analytical traditions. The formulation

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<sup>3</sup> Barber (1998) was part of a series of autobiographical pieces by outstanding historians of economics published in 1995-98 under the initiative of Donald Walker, then editor of the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*. Other contributors to the series included Don Moggridge, Samuel Hollander, Bob Coats, Warren Samuels and John Whitaker.



and testing of “master models”, associated to distinct economic schools, play an important role in the history and application of economic ideas, which is behind the purpose of the book, he claimed. In democratic societies,

The social significance of theoretical inquiries largely depends upon the extent to which their insights can be transmitted to a public audience. For this reason, the more we all know about the properties of analytical systems employed by economists, the more intelligent our judgment on matters of policy are likely to be. (Barber 1967, p. 13)

A main feature of the book, unsurprisingly, is the attention to issues pertaining to economic growth and development, which are often linked to policy-making. Barber’s (1967) emphasis on growth was picked up by a reviewer, who suggested that the book “will appeal to that legion who have become growth economists” (McDowell 1969, p. 544). Indeed, Barber (1967) refers to growth and development economists – such as Lewis, Hirschman, Harrod, Domar, Fel’dman and Mahahalanobis – who hardly (if ever) are mentioned in HET textbooks.

Barber ascribes the relative neglect of long-period development during the neoclassical era, interestingly enough, to the experience of continuous expansion during the Victorian age. Economic growth, “though not unimportant, appeared to be capable of taking care of itself” if only the market mechanisms worked well. Moreover, contrary to Malthus and Marx, for neoclassical economists progress seemed to “resolve social tensions instead of aggravating them” (Barber 1967, pp. 163-64). Even so, neoclassical tools and arguments (such as shadow prices) proved relevant for aspects of postwar development economics and planning (pp. 217-18).

Solow's 1956 growth model is not mentioned, probably because of its recent extraction.<sup>4</sup>

Barber (1967, p. 7) acknowledged intellectual debts to a “remarkable group” of Balliol College tutors, during his 1950s student days in Oxford: émigré development economists Paul Streeten and Thomas Balogh, and English philosopher John Patrick Corbett. Streeten was close to Gunnar Myrdal, whose *Political element in the development of economic theory* he translated in 1953. Barber admired Myrdal's ([1930] 1953) approach to acknowledging the value element in economics, endorsed in his 1961 book (p. 6) and discussed in detail in chapter 3 of Barber (2008). In 1961-62 Barber joined in Stockholm, thanks to Streeten's intermediation, a team led by Myrdal, involved in extensive investigation of the economic development of South Asia, particularly India (Barber 1998, p. 183; Myrdal 1968). He undertook the drafting of much of part V of the book, on “Problems of labor utilization” (Myrdal 1968, p. xvi).

Barber's engagement with Myrdal's project on India made him mindful of the role played by British economists – from Thomas Mun to James Steuart, Adam Smith, Lord Lauderdale, Thomas R. Malthus, James Mill, J.R. McCulloch, Richard Jones and J.S. Mill – in matters related to the government of the sub-continent by the British East India Company between 1660 and 1858, as well as the influence of those issues on their respective theoretical frameworks. That is already noticeable in Barber's (1967, p. 96) remark about James Mill's “zeal for translating Ricardian and utilitarian doctrine into a massive program of reform in India” and its influence on the development of Mill's thought (unlike his son John Stuart Mill), fully developed in his 1969 *HOPE* article and in the 1975 book.

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<sup>4</sup> Cassel's 1918 model of uniform growth, overlooked in the 1967 book, is mentioned in Barber (2008, p. 3), probably under Myrdal's influence.

### III Master models and policy-making

Barber's main contribution, qua development economist, to the history of economics was his 1975 investigation of the interplay between British economic analysis and colonial policy in India. Whereas Lewis did not address the classical views about the economic development of "backward" areas (such as India or Ireland), that captured Barber's attention. With its focus on the interaction of economic theory and policy-making, the book on India set the tone for Barber's trajectory as a historian of economics for the next decades, when the history of American economic thought came to the fore in his agenda (Barber 1985, 1996). Barber (2008, chapters 8-10) would come back to the history of development economics as Myrdal's biographer, his last major work in history of thought.

When Barber embarked upon his research on India and British economic thought, the standard reference on the subject was the 1959 volume on *English utilitarians and India*, by the well-known Cambridge historian Eric Stokes (see Bayly 1998). Barber (1969, p. 88n; 1975, p. 148n) mentioned Stokes (1959) only sparsely, but both times in connection with the key topic of 19<sup>th</sup> century land taxation in India, discussed in chapter 2 of that book and in chapters 9 and 10 of Barber (1975). Stokes (1959) was a pivotal contribution to the political history of utilitarianism and its application to the administration of India. Barber (1969, p. 89) shared with Stokes the view that India provided classical economists – particularly James Mill, author in 1817 of the *History of British India* and a high official of the East Indian Company from 1819 to his death – with an opportunity to "apply and test the latest advances in economic theory" and economic reform with "minimal political constraints", which was not possible at home. From that perspective, "the use of India as a laboratory for

Western social scientists considerably antedates the Ford Foundation” (ibid; 1975, p. 160).

Stokes focused on the transformation in the purposes of political dominion after the Industrial Revolution, when, instead of providing a source of tribute, the British rule in India came to be regarded “as an instrument for ensuring the necessary conditions of law and order by which the potentially vast Indian market could be conquered by British industry” (Stokes 1959, p. xiii). That is where Barber and Stokes parted company, as the former disputed the notion that the goal of British imperial practice in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to “exploit India for the benefit of the mother country” (Barber 1969, p. 99). Instead, Barber (1969, pp. 99-100; 1975, introductory chapter) claimed that classical economists were mainly concerned with increasing the welfare of the “Indian masses”, which is why he described them as planting the roots of development economists.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Stokes (1976, p. 649) reacted negatively to Barber’s project, as the “ground is too well trodden and the distance traversed too great” to allow for an original contribution. Development economists (Singer 1976; Rosen 1976; Price 1975), on the other hand, praised the book, although they agree with Stokes that it lacked discussion of reactions on the Indian side. But that was not Barber’s angle. The gap was filled by Ambirajan (1978), which Barber (1975, p. 189n) mentioned from its 1964 Manchester PhD thesis version. Moreover, the scope of Barber’s book was broader than Stokes’, as it covered as well theoretical responses by mercantilist writers to trade patterns with India, James Steuart’s 1772 pioneer discussion of the bearing of monetary factors on India’s economy (called “structuralist” by Barber

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<sup>5</sup> Historians of development economics are divided in that regard. Arndt (1987, pp. 22-29) tends to agree with Stokes, whereas Cowen and Shenton (1996, chapter 1) support Barber’s point that the pre-history of development economics may be traced to the British rule in India.

1975, p. 85), and Adam Smith's criticism of the monopolistic practices of the East India Company and difficulty in accounting for economic stagnation in pre-British India. As discussed by Barber (1975, chapters 9 and 10), the puzzle was solved by James Mill and Malthus, who both used the new differential rent theory – formulated by Malthus at the East-India College, Haileybury, as a reaction to debates about India – to argue that India's poverty stemmed largely from mistaken excessive taxation of the gross (rather than net) agricultural output in traditional Hindu society, which J. Mill attempted to correct as part of his overall strategy for Indian development.<sup>6</sup>

The application of Ricardian-Malthusian rent theory to agrarian conditions in India was, however, criticized by Richard Jones, who pointed to non-capitalist features of traditional peasant agriculture. With his concern about what Barber called “structural distinctiveness” between advanced and backward economies, Jones turned into Barber's unlikely hero (see Miller 1976) and warning of the hazards of transferring concepts from one institutional environment to another. Barber (1994) revisited that theme, this time with an eye to whether Lewis's (1954) dualism would fit into the classical framework. Lewis (like R. Jones in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) would be relegated to heterodox economics, an “arresting irony” (Barber 1994, p. 66). Moreover, Barber found a parallel between James Mill and John Stuart Mill on one side and 1970s Chicago economists on the other as advisers to non-democratic regimes in India and Chile respectively (Barber 1995, p. 1947). James and J.S. Mill were policy planners for the East India Company, members of an administration that did not tolerate political dissidence. But they were confident that application of their

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<sup>6</sup> As Barber pointed out, classical economists never set foot in India, unlike modern development economists. In the introduction to his *History*, Mill (1817, vol. 1, p. xix) saw that as an advantage, since universal truths about human behavior could best be gained in Europe than in India, where knowledge acquired by visitors would be necessarily biased and partial (see also Boianovsky 2018b).

“scientific” ideas would set India on its growth path, which turned out to be misguided. Barber (2008, pp. 147-49) also drew some parallels between Myrdal (1968) and J. Mill. Both were children of the Enlightenment, who praised rationality and saw dysfunctional institutions as a key to India’s economic problems.

Although Barber wrote extensively on the history of American economic thought, he did not discuss in any detail whether there was such a thing as American development economics between late 18<sup>th</sup> and mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (on that notion, see Meardon 2018). Indeed, the puzzle that attracted Barber’s attention, in that connection, was what could account for the poverty of American intellectual achievement in economics before the end of the 1800s (Barber 2003). Interestingly enough, in his HES Presidential Address Barber (1990, p. 115) claimed that even if there were no dearth of “master models” in American economics at the time, the economic development of the country for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be little affected by policy-making in a nation with abundant natural resources, light taxation and a very small role for government (this is in contrast with Lewis’s model; see Hansen 1979). America was then essentially an importer of economic theories. International transmission of ideas adds an important historical dimension to economic development, Barber argued. Writing around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Barber (1990, p. 121) expected that the transition to market economies and the quest for understanding alternative economic “models” in Eastern Europe would have significant impact on the demand for scholarship in the history of economics. Barber’s expectations in that regard were only partially borne out (see e.g. Paganelli 2012), but his overall concern with the nexus between history of economic thought and economic development experiences has proved fruitful.

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