

INTRODUCTION TO THE BARBER SYMPOSIUM

BY

MAURO BOIANOVSKY AND ROBERT W. DIMAND

William (Bill) Barber, Distinguished Fellow and past president of the History of Economics Society, was an eminent scholar of the history of American economic thought, of the role of economists in policy-making, and of economic development, as well as being a friend and mentor to many historians of economics. His whole career gave a rousingly affirmative answer to the question posed in his HES Presidential Address: “Does the Scholarship in the History of Economics Have a Useful Future?” (Barber 1990). He remained intellectually active and productive into his ninetieth year, with his review of Craufurd Goodwin’s book on Walter Lippmann appearing on EH.net in March 2015. The papers in this symposium, following from a round table at the HES 2017 conference in Toronto, honor aspects of his work.

Bill Barber went from his home-state Kansas to study history at Harvard in the fall of 1942, where he also took, and shone in, several economics courses (for Barber’s biographical background, see Bateman 2001 and Barber 1998). He interrupted his studies at Harvard as soon as he turned eighteen in 1943 to serve in the army during World War II. His three years in the army included eighteen months in France and Germany (including six months in Germany after the war ended), and he returned from a trench in the Vosges in late 1944 with trench foot, from which he suffered for the rest of his life. He resumed his studies at Harvard in 1946. Not only did he win a Rhodes Scholarship to study PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) at Oxford, but at the interview in December 1949 he made such an impression on the chair of the selection committee, an economist who was dean of graduate studies at Kansas State, that the young history graduate was persuaded to teach economics at Kansas State for a semester before going to Oxford. As soon as he finished his Oxford BA in 1951, Kansas State invited him back as an assistant professor of economics, an offer he declined in order to take up a position as economic analyst in the US government in Washington. His early exposure to “bureaucratic culture” proved instrumental when Barber investigated, some thirty years later, the role of economists in the shaping of economic policies (see Barber 1998, p. 181). By the mid-1950s he became attracted, like many others at the time, to the economic problems of developing countries. When he went back to Oxford in 1955 for his doctoral research, Barber decided to specialize in development economics, inspired by a seminar given at Nuffield College by

Mauro Boianovsky, Universidade de Brasilia; Robert W. Dimand, Brock University.

ISSN 1053-8372 print; ISSN 1469-9656 online/19/03000315-318 © The History of Economics Society, 2019
doi:10.1017/S1053837219000014

W. Arthur Lewis a few years earlier, and did fieldwork in central Africa, with his dissertation becoming his first book, *The Economy of British Central Africa* (1961) (see Mauro Boianovsky on “The Development Economist as Historian of Economics” in this symposium).

With six tenure-track offers among which to choose, Bill joined Wesleyan University, a liberal arts college, in 1957 and spent his career there, including a year as acting president of the university. As his Wesleyan colleague Richard Adelstein recalls in “Border Crossings” (in this symposium), Bill’s cross-disciplinary background in history and economics at Harvard and in philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford was reflected in his co-founding in 1960 of Wesleyan’s College of Social Studies, which provided undergraduates with three years of intense immersion in economics, government, history, and philosophy, “with a relentless regime of weekly essays and tutorial meetings,” the closest approach to Oxford PPE in the western hemisphere (perhaps the closest anywhere outside Oxford). There, he taught what Adelstein describes as “an intensive, essay-friendly nine-week introduction to the operation of markets for first-year students in the college who were, at the same time, being similarly introduced to the (then rather Anglocentric) history of Europe from the French Revolution to World War II and to the various forms and theories of government it produced during these years.” Bill’s lectures in the college led to his best-selling Penguin paperback, *A History of Economic Thought* (1967), still in print after half a century (now from Wesleyan University Press) and translated into eight languages (including a pirated edition in Farsi).¹

As Mauro Boianovsky shows, Bill’s background in development economics influenced his research agenda as historian of economics. Early in his teaching career at Wesleyan, Bill Barber was a “principal assistant” on future Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal’s monumental *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (3 vols., 1968).² This involvement eventually led Bill, by then in his eighties, to write *Gunnar Myrdal: An Intellectual Biography* (2008), in Palgrave Macmillan’s series Great Thinkers in Economics. The centrality of India in *Asian Drama*, and a focus on the involvement of economists in understanding development, led Bill Barber to examine “James Mill and the Theory of Economic Policy in India” (1969) in the inaugural issue of *History of Political Economy* and to write *British Economic Thought and India, 1600–1858: A Study in Development Economics* (1975). That book was a stroke of genius, with its exploration of the long and rich history of the Indian involvement of British economists, mercantilist (Thomas Mun and Sir Josiah Child were both directors of the East India Company) and then classical (James Mill and John Stuart Mill at the East India House; Malthus at the East India College, Haileybury).

When Bill Barber came to the history of economic thought, the field (including Bill’s own 1967 Penguin volume) was strongly Anglocentric in its coverage, especially if Karl

¹On March 29, 2017, some of Barber’s Wesleyan colleagues held a round-table seminar on “Bill Barber: a Celebration of His Intellectual and Collegial Contributions,” available in video format: <https://www.wesleyan.edu/econ/barber-video.html#> (accessed March 31, 2019). It provides further valuable insights into his long career at Wesleyan University, as does Smith (2014).

²Bill was delighted when one of the present authors (RD) found a set of *Asian Drama* in the theater section of a Canadian bookstore.

Marx is counted as British by residence, and, with a few exceptions—most notably Joseph Dorfman (1946–59)—neglected history of American economic thought. Interestingly enough, in view of what was to come later, Barber (1967) did not mention Irving Fisher; the only American economists discussed in the book are John Bates Clark and Thorstein Veblen. Bill did much to overcome that neglect and to remind the American economics profession of its history (e.g., Barber 1987, 1988).

The interaction between economic thought and public policy, central to Bill Barber's work in development economics, was also central to his studies of American economics, notably *The Evolution of Wage-Price Policy during the Kennedy Administration* (an eighty-one-page study in the Brookings Institution Economic Studies, 1974); *From New Era to New Deal: Herbert Hoover, the Economists, and American Economic Policy, 1921–1933* (1985); *Designs within Disorder: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Economists, and the Shaping of American Economic Policy, 1933–1945* (1996); and "Chile con Chicago" (1995). His books on the history of American economics were widely reviewed not only in history of economics journals such as *HOPE* and *JHET* but also in journals such as the *Journal of Economic Literature*, *Journal of Economic History*, *Economic Journal*, and *Economic History Review*. Richard Adelstein and Steven Medema consider this substantial body of work in this symposium, with Adelstein focusing on *From New Era to New Deal*, particularly attending to Bill's taking Herbert Hoover seriously as an economic policy-maker (both as secretary of commerce and as president), and Medema on *Designs within Disorder*, with close attention to the audience for whom Bill was writing. As Medema emphasizes in "The Economist and the Economist's Audience," Barber (1985, 1996) showed the active role of presidents Hoover and Roosevelt in transferring the economic advice they received (and in choosing what advice to receive, and from whom), reshaping the advice as they communicated it to Congress, to government agencies, and to the broader public.

Research for *From New Era to New Deal* and for *Designs within Disorder* drew Bill's attention to a great American scientific economist, who was also colorful, sometimes eccentric and controversial, the economic and social reformer Irving Fisher of Yale, who appeared repeatedly in those two books as a giver of economic advice, much of it unsolicited. Fisher's papers at Yale were conveniently located just a short drive from Wesleyan, and, with the enthusiastic support of Yale economist James Tobin (and hesitant, discreet funding from the American Economic Association), Bill undertook the editing of a fourteen-volume edition of *The Works of Irving Fisher* (Fisher 1997), integrating Fisher's correspondence with reprints of his major books and articles, excerpts from reviews of his books and Fisher's responses to reviews, and editorial commentary (see Robert Dimand on Barber in "William J. Barber on Irving Fisher and American Economic Thought" in this symposium). Just as he took Herbert Hoover seriously as a policy-maker, despite Hoover's presiding over the onset of the Great Depression, Bill helped the economics profession once again take Irving Fisher seriously as one of the great economists of his time, despite his unforgettable gaffe about stock prices in October 1929, while not shying away from presenting Fisher's foibles, including his involvement with the eugenics movement.

Bill Barber was an exemplary historian of economic thought, an innovative and meticulous researcher, a fine writer, a mentor to many young historians of economics, a gentleman, and a scholar, to whom we pay tribute in this symposium.

REFERENCES

- Barber, William J. 1961. *The Economy of British Central Africa: A Case Study of Economic Development in a Dualistic Society*. London: Oxford University Press. Reprinted Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- . 1967. *A History of Economic Thought*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. Reprinted Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- . 1969. "James Mill and the Theory of Economic Policy in India." *History of Political Economy* 1 (1): 85–100.
- . 1974. *The Evolution of Wage-Price Policy in the Kennedy Administration*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Economic Studies Program.
- . 1975. *British Economic Thought and India, 1600–1858: A Study in the History of Development Economics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1985. *From New Era to New Deal: Herbert Hoover, the Economists, and American Economic Policy, 1921–1933*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1987. "Should the American Economic Association Have Toasted Simon Newcomb at Its 100th Birthday Party?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1 (1): 179–183.
- , ed. 1988. *Breaking the Academic Mould: Economists and American Higher Learning in the Nineteenth Century*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. Second edition entitled *Economists and the Higher Learning in the Nineteenth Century*, with new introduction, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1993.
- . 1990. "Does Scholarship in the History of Economics Have a Useful Future?" *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 12 (2): 110–123.
- . 1995. "Chile con Chicago: A Review Essay." *Journal of Economic Literature* 33 (4): 1941–1949.
- . 1996. *Designs within Disorder: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Economists, and the Shaping of American Economic Policy, 1933–1945*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1998. "Not So Dismal a Science: Reflections." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 20 (2): 177–189.
- . 2008. *Gunnar Myrdal: An Intellectual Biography*. London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bateman, Bradley. 2001. "The Skills of Freedom: The Liberal Education of William J. Barber." In Steven Medema and Warren Samuels, eds., *Historians of Economics and Economic Thought*. London: Routledge, pp. 4–16.
- Dorfman, Joseph. 1946–59. *The Economic Mind in American Civilization, 1606–1933*. Five volumes. New York: Viking.
- Fisher, Irving. 1997. *The Works of Irving Fisher*. Edited by William J. Barber assisted by Robert W. Dimand and Kevin Foster, consulting editor James Tobin. Fourteen volumes. London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Smith, Nancy. 2014. "William Barber Oral History Interview, Jan 15, 2014." *Wesleyan University Oral History Project*. Paper 2. <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/oralhistory/2>. Accessed March 31, 2019.