

MARTIN BRONFENBRENNER, 1914-1997¹

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Martin Bronfenbrenner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania of immigrant Jewish parents, his mother from Austria and his father from Russia. His parents met at Columbia University where they both received Ph.D. degrees. His father became a distinguished bacteriologist whose career took him from New York to Pittsburgh, then Boston, back to New York and finally to St. Louis where he was for many years on the faculty of Washington University. His mother was a pioneering historian of science who was killed in an automobile accident a few months after Martin's birth. The contrasting backgrounds and values of Martin's parents and their respective families may help to explain the eclecticism and ambivalence which were to characterise his career. His maternal Ornstein family were respectable middle class Viennese. His paternal Bronfenbrenners were social revolutionaries who escaped Odessa with a price on their heads and the Czar's police not far behind.

Martin was a delicate child and was diagnosed with various ailments and given the prognosis of an early demise. Among the preposterous cures prescribed for him was the consumption of hydrochloric acid through a glass tube. His supposed condition stood in the way of all plans to go away to college (Harvard was contemplated), and he took his A.B. at Washington University (1930-34) while living at home. There he became editorial writer on the student newspaper, a successful debater, and second violinist in the orchestra. His interest in economics developed early; he read Ricardo and Marx and won a \$1 00 prize for an essay on J. M. Keynes's *Treatise on Money*.

What to do after college was a puzzle for Martin. He proposed graduate school in economics, but his scientific father was dubious and preferred medicine. An interview was arranged at Harvard with the great former Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter. Martin found him 'a bird-like little man with pince-nez eye-glasses and a commanding air of authority on matters vegetable, animal, or mineral'. Frankfurter confirmed his father's scepticism of economics and advised that if indeed Martin must pursue the field it should be at the University of Wisconsin with John R. Commons or the London School of Economics, presumably with Harold Laski. Characteristically Martin, who would remain suspicious of all *ex cathedra* advice, selected instead the University of Chicago, the only institution that offered him financial aid but a choice that his father assured him would lead to his own funeral. As he later recalled 'to Chicago I went and

¹ This account draws heavily on Martin Bronfenbrenner's unpublished autobiography entitled, *Marginal Economist* contained under restrictions in the Special Collections Library at Duke University and consulted with the kind permission of Mrs. Teruko Bronfenbrenner. I am grateful for comments by Teruko Bronfenbrenner, Neil De Marchi, and Allen Kelley.

without benefit of mortuary preparation.'

Martin arrived at the University of Chicago in 1934 and stayed until 1938 during a period of great activity in the economics department. He came to know well and to develop strong impressions of the dominant figures of the time. The first person he met, at class registration, was the great Frank Knight, 'a little man with a toothbrush mustache, a squeaky voice, and a quirk of wrinkling up the lower half of his face while propounding defiance of the universe, including graduate students desirous of enrolling in his courses'. He took classes from most of the celebrated figures of that era. He found Jacob Viner to be 'another little man - a strutting Talmudic Napoleon. He had big yellow teeth, the remains of a mop of red hair, and facial expression alternating at express-train speed between joviality, challenge, and utter contempt'. As instructor in the theory sequence Viner played the role of 'Lord High Executioner'. Martin studied economic history with John U. Nef, public finance with Simeon Leland, and he travelled to the University of Minnesota for a summer with Arthur Marget, the authority on the history of prices. Like most graduate students Martin learned as much from his fellows as from his teachers. In his two classes with Viner alone were four future Nobel laureates: Milton Friedman, Paul Samuelson (an undergraduate but taking graduate classes), Herbert Simon and George Stigler. Other fellow students of note included Herbert Stein, H. Gregg Lewis, Sune Carlson, Allen Wallis, and Jacob Mosak. He joined the radical American Student Union but not the Marxist wing because he could not accept the labour theory of value.

At a time when in Chicago and in the profession at large contending factions were being drawn up over economic theory and method, Martin refused to swear allegiance to anyone. Indeed, his instinct was to look for something interesting and valuable in all factions, and usually he found it! He took away something of value from all dimensions of this early Chicago School. Henry Simons, Chicago's 'worrier-in-chief', was something of an enigma. On the one hand he seemed 'a bored, supercilious insomniac and fashion plate' who sometimes arrived hung over for his 11 a.m. class. On the other hand Simons more than any other teacher weaned this young student from his 'Washington University Institutionalism' and demonstrated 'the notion of an economic system as a system - as distinguished from a jungle - and also as a necessary though not sufficient condition for the maintenance of freedom in the large'. Simons imbued Martin with the lifelong appreciation that 'the "what" and "how" of production and the "for whom" of distribution form a web sufficiently seamless to render it difficult to alter distribution significantly without jeopardizing our quasi-solutions of the production problem'.

While he was still imbibing the pure milk of free market doctrine from Simons, Viner and Knight, Martin was also becoming a 'Keynesian'. He became aware of the *General Theory* as soon as it was published in 1936 and was converted by 1939, remaining 'more or less a Keynesian for over 20 years' or at least 'a "bastard" Keynesian as defined by Mrs. Joan Robinson of Cambridge - from unwillingness to guarantee or underwrite any employment level, whether "full", "high", "natural", or anything else, "irregardless" of what might be happening to real or money wage rates'. He was converted partly by R. G. D. Allen, a summer visitor to Chicago, and by his fellow student Paul Samuelson. But, he reported later, 'my real push in

to Keynesianism came from Oskar Lange from Poland by way of L.S.E. and Berkeley'. Lange brought with him to Chicago three colleagues who, with their leader, were known as the 'Lange Quartet': Abba Lerner, Melvin Reder, and Leonid Hurwicz. 'Like Lange Lerner was carefully logical and excellently organized. Unlike Lange he was also lively, eccentric and brilliant'. On reflection years later Martin concluded that 'Lange, Lerner and Reder made a temporary Keynesian out of me - partly by their own arguments, partly by the materials they induced me to read, and partly I suspect, by the weaknesses and periodic absences of the Chicago opposition'.

Martin wrote his dissertation with Henry Schultz, a 'gentle gentleman' and not the 'mathematical monster' he was reputed to be, on 'an extension of general equilibrium analysis to the theory of money,' a topic he came to loath and with which he did not deal in his publications. He acknowledged that Don Patinkin handled the subject with much greater success in a Chicago dissertation a few years later. Martin was not inclined to dispute Frank Knight's judgment of the dissertation that 'since a lifetime might be required to correct the mistakes in each chapter, the whole essay might as well pass as written'. In order to calm his nerves before the thesis examination Martin played the violin, and he was startled to have his whole committee enter while he was in mid-score. This became known as the only Chicago doctoral examination with a musical overture.

Henry Schultz died in a motor accident just as Martin completed his dissertation, and for the second time in his life he was orphaned by the automobile. As he began to prepare to go on the academic job market he was befriended by another strong personality in the department, Paul Douglas, 'a big burly activist ... already tiring of academic life'. Martin had been attracted to Chicago partly by Douglas's reputation and had taken a course with him on comparative economic systems that dealt extensively with the Marxist model.

The urgent need to find some kind of employment in the depths of the depression required Martin to reflect seriously on his career goals. He discovered that unlike many of his fellow graduate students he did not see economics as 'a soft science in need of hardening', but rather 'as a component of social philosophy, an interpreter of history, or a key to Reform with a capital R'. He appreciated that economists with this kind of commitment to humanistic culture would always have to struggle to avoid second class status. Accordingly, he thought of migrating to economic journalism, where he might have had a distinguished career. 'I was impressed by the widening gap between the economics of universities and the economics of the media and the legislatures. I saw a role for myself in narrowing that gap'. But there were no jobs in the media! Accordingly, 'teaching and the campus world loomed increasingly as second best'. He saw himself on the campus armed with a wide range of analytical tools and a large variety of interesting questions. He would spend a lifetime applying the former to the latter in ways that would be comprehensible, if not to the masses at least to an intelligent elite. He told of travelling in 1938 by train from Chicago to Detroit for the annual meetings of the American Economic Association and encountering Harry Gunnison Brown of the University of Missouri. 'With nothing better to do, Professor Brown spent several hours translating for my benefit the complexities of "modern economics" into the simpler language of his own generation.... Much of my later floundering

represents attempts, seldom successful, to apply the lessons of that one evening with Professor Brown'. In his old age Martin marvelled at his decision to pursue and persevere with economics. 'Could I have guessed how economics would develop in the half-century since my graduation from Washington University, I should never have attempted to become a professional economist'. His speculation on this point may be doubted!

After Martin arrived in Detroit for his first experience with the AEA 'slave market' he quickly became disgusted with the process, and especially with the sycophantic behaviour apparently required of aspirants for positions. Throughout his life he composed doggerel verse to express his feelings, and one from this occasion is worth repeating:

Prayer of a Ph.D.

I contemplate the juicy fruits
of licking my professor's boots
And pray, O God, you'll take the trouble
to fork my tongue and make it double

Have pity, Lord, upon my plight
I cannot think, or read, or write.
But who could know one for a dunce
Could I but lick two boots at once?

Give ear, O God, to my petition,
And when I find some soft position
I'll always be at home to you
And dedicate a tome to you

Martin's first teaching was statistics to undergraduates at the University of Chicago. The next year he took a position at the Central YMCA College in Chicago, later to become Roosevelt University, and at the same time he enrolled in the Northwestern University law school. There he found himself among 'legal tortoises' in contrast to the economist hares of his last few years, but at least the case method 'brought him back to reality'.

The outbreak of war in Europe raised many questions for Martin. Should he enlist? If not would he be drafted for some dreadful duty? Where could he make the greatest contribution to the war effort? Brief stints at the Treasury in Washington and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago demonstrated that he was not an organisation man. One of his big problems, that became evident as soon as he was embedded in a bureaucracy, was that he was an incorrigible tease. Usually the teasing was gentle, but sometimes it had a purpose. He disliked pretensions of all kinds, and he could deflate a stuffed shirt with stiletto speed, no matter whether worn by a ponderous undergraduate, a pompous colleague, or an officious bureaucrat. His teasing of senior officers and military censors during the war undoubtedly constrained his naval career. He even teased himself! After he became 'distinguished professor emeritus' at Duke University in 1984 he sometimes signed

letters to friends: 'Bronf Von Brenner, Extinguished Professor Demeritus', followed by a large seal in red with the Japanese character for 'fool'.

In 1943, almost by chance, he signed up for Japanese language training in the U.S. Navy, and this action ultimately reoriented his career. He was one of the first language officers sent in after the surrender of Japan, and he quickly picked up what he called the 'Japan Bug'. The questions Japan faced when Martin landed there were ones that resonated to his longstanding interest in economic systems. 'It was a society transforming itself before my eyes from a military dictatorship to something very different, although nobody knew just what. (What was the difference, I was asked, between individualism, liberalism, and Communism?)'.²

He developed a warm affection for the country and the Japanese people and a continuing curiosity about their economy. He made frequent trips back after he left the service, and he was a member of the Shoup Commission on the Japanese Tax System in 1949. He regularly taught courses on the Japanese economy and he was a pioneer of Japanese studies in the United States. There too he met his wife Teruko, with whom he had two children, Ken and June. Martin remained deeply ambivalent about Japanese 'progress' since World War II. He remarked: 'No more than anyone else did I anticipate the "miracle" of Japanese growth and recovery, and most of the time I wish it hadn't happened'.³

Martin's first academic appointment after the war was at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where for a decade (1947-1957) he was in more or less continuous tension with the Institutionalist mainstream of the department. He then taught at Michigan State (1957-1959), the University of Minnesota (1959- 1962), Carnegie-Mellon University (1962-1971), Aoyama Gakuin University (1984-1990) and Duke University (1971-1984 and from 1991 until his death). He took teaching very seriously; some of his students include Anne Krueger, Albert Ando, Kalman Cohen, and Richard Muth. He was vice president and distinguished fellow of the American Economic Association, president of the Southern Economic Association and the History of Economics Society, and fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Martin's intellectual hallmarks, wherever he taught and conducted research, were insatiable curiosity, eclecticism, and an unwillingness to become pigeon- holed in any one subdiscipline. He thought of himself in baseball terms as 'utility infielder' of the profession. He had an unusually well-developed sense of balance among contending positions. He was always able to see all sides represented. There were not many other economists of his generation who could report that their 'principal debts' were to the 'orthodox and rationalist Chicago School' but also to 'the historical and institutional revolts against orthodox economics, to Lord Keynes (including his critics and defenders) and to Karl Marx (likewise)'. He described one of his first articles in the *Journal of Political Economy*⁴ as an attempt at

² A conversation with Martin Bronfenbrenner', *Eastern Economic Journal*, vol. 13, (January-March), 1987, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The dilemma of liberal economics', *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 54, pp. 334-46, August, 1946.

'compromise between the Keynesian and Chicago positions'. He kept seeking such a compromise and the final fruit was his book *Income Distribution Theory* (Aldine, 1971). He would delight in making the case for governmental intervention to a Libertarian, and he would press every social democrat to explain why the state should perform some function that the market could do as well. One consequence of this posture was that he was mistrusted by zealots of all kinds. He reported 'None of these groups accepts me as a member or a follower but assigns me to one of the others or writes me off as a lost sheep'.

Shortly before his death Martin explained succinctly with a series of points what he had believed over his lifetime in economics and what he had attempted to achieve.

1. He resisted the rise of mathematical and statistical methods and relegation of the profession's 'humanists' to second class citizenship.

2. He urged an 'instrumentalist' rather than a doctrinaire approach to economic method. Use what works.

3. He was a 'dissident monetarist' paying more attention than the true faithful to fluctuations in the demand for money.

4. He attributed economic fluctuations to shifts in aggregate demand among categories of goods.

5. In microeconomics he remained 'a heretic,' unpersuaded that either consumers or firms were single-minded, single-goal maximisers.

6. He was persuaded that norms of income distribution were no more than reflections of the subjective choices of individuals.

7. He saw trade unions as obstacles to distributional equity.

8. He was only a 'reluctant free-trader'.

9. He thought protection in the industrialised countries remained the main obstacle to progress in the developing world.

10. He was convinced that Karl Marx was 'probably the greatest secular social scientist of modern times'. He 'took Marx seriously without being himself a Marxist'.

This was a powerful coda for a lifetime of service to economics.

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