

## Martin Bronfenbrenner as Colleague

### Marjorie McElroy<sup>1</sup>

I am Marjorie McElroy and I am the current Chair of the Department of Economics. I have known Martin since he first came to Duke, admired him, and have been somewhat afraid of him over a lot of that time. I was thinking when I saw this nice program that I almost wished Mr. Bender [whose comments follow] had typed the program on Martin's old typewriter. We all have treasured items that he typed on his old typewriter.

Now like Martin, I want to assume the best of you, that you all did your homework before you got here and, that you understood it all. That means, in this case, that you've already read his obituary, but, for those of you who did not, in honor of Martin, I will give you a second chance. You can pick up a copy of the handout after the services. Let me say before I start to talk about Martin and his career, that my place on this podium really belongs to many of my colleagues—colleagues who shared generously with me their thoughts about Martin. I also spent time with Martin's writings over the last week, including especially an interview of himself, a very humorous interview, that Martin sent to Allen Kelley some years ago. Allen had a lot to do with what I have to say today and other chairs of Martin—Dudley Wallace, John Vernon, Henry Grabowski, Neal De Marchi, and Allen—all have wonderful things to say about being associated with Martin over the years.

There are many nice ways to talk about Martin: he is readily described as a scholar of intellectual depth and integrity; he possessed a remarkable sense of history; he was a devoted educator in the broadest sense. As Allen put it, he was an enemy of dismal-views and dismal-presentations of the dismal-science; a scholar who made it his business to thoroughly understand differing points of view and to synthesize them in order to understand different types of economies and different histories of culture and of political economy.

Always witty, Martin of course, had a real flair for language, English being one of them. His witty one liners would just pop up, and even though you were a bit stung from your recognition of an opposite viewpoint, you simultaneously started laughing with him, which made his warm and impish grin its very most impish.

Martin was remarkably curious and open minded. He loved Japan and learning about Japan. More generally, he was always eager to learn about how things were done in other times and places in order to better understand this time and place. He traveled extensively, internationally as a lecturer and visiting economist. After a visit to China in the early 1980s, he was being interviewed about what he learned on this trip and he referred to his expertise as that of an "airport economist." His self assessments remained modest. His curriculum vitae, for example, totally forgot the fact that he was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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In his personal dealings, as Dudley Wallace's tribute made perfectly clear, no department chair could ask for a citizen who asked for so little himself, and contributed so much.

To the very end of his life, he helped recruit faculty, enlivened seminars, lectured internationally, and taught. To give you an idea, over the last calendar year, he taught summer school, fall semester, and spring semester right up until he became too ill to teach anymore.

He was an educator in the broadest sense. As many of you know, he wrote extensively in the professional literature of economics, of history and of the social sciences more broadly. He traveled widely seeking to understand other societies and economies and to share his knowledge, as well as mysteries and anomalies. He cared passionately about teaching the classroom and way beyond the classroom.

As a self proclaimed frustrated journalist, he also educated us in his famous and infamous letters to the editor. Since coming to Duke, these were showered on the Durham Morning Herald and the Duke Chronicle or the "vomicle" as he used to call it.

A favorite of mine was his tongue-in-cheek scheme for promoting homelessness in Durham. The plan included all of the things we do in the name of good housing that, often unwittingly, drives up the price of housing for the poor: pass lots of zoning laws, restrict the size of building lots, require only high quality housing, pass and enforce rent control laws, and so on and so forth.

He educated us in casual conversation. He might have told me the following in a pedantic way in which case, I wouldn't remember it at all. But what he said was something like, "After World War II, many Americans learned Japanese in bars and bordellos. But in military language school, we learned the language of the court and so the occupying brass could talk to Japanese officials without embarrassing themselves."

No wonder students, both fans and detractors, found his classes memorable.

I can only speak inadequately and briefly about Martin's contributions to economics and the social sciences in general. He published his first three journal articles in 1939 in some of the very top journals, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, and the *American Economic Review*. About 300 articles, 5 books, and five and a half decades later, he published his last professional article in 1995. He was well-known in diverse areas: the theory of income distribution, macro economics, international trade and development, and as an expert on the Japanese economy which sort of served as his laboratory for testing his ideas.

His long time colleague at Duke, Professor E. Roy Weintraub, wrote in part, Bronfenbrenner's interests in writings reflect a rare catholicity in economics. His writings being characterized by elegance and felicitous phrasing and further adorned by verses from obscure poets and, as many of you know, popular operettas.

In his major work on income distribution theory, he modified neoclassical economic theory so that it could frame questions raised in both classical and neo-Marxian analysis.

This is one of a lifetime of countless examples in Martin's quest for his own understanding in which he synthesized views of divergent schools of economic thought, including Marxian, radical, Keynesian, post Keynesian, neoclassical, monetarist, and, I am sure, many more that I never even heard of. Failing synthesis, he tolerated inconsistencies, keeping all sides alive in any discussion, never pretending one point of view had a lock on the truth. In Martin's view, the worst academic sin was "to refuse to consider a problem at all when one suspects the answer cannot be reconciled with one's own general position."

*Marjorie McElroy*

In Blaug's book of 100 famous economists, a sort of who's who in economics, Martin was asked to list his own contributions and he said, and I quote: "Assisted in keeping general economics alive, and in making Japanological economics respectable. Tried to show that Marxian productivity analysis need not be anti-labor nor non-Marxist analysis anti Marxist, nor academic freedom a cover for activist violence."

In this statement, you can see a lot of things about Martin. You see modesty, the yin and yang of his thinking, his seeing complementarities of nominally divergent views, his love of academic freedom, his intellect and his love of intellectual development, both that of his students and of himself.

Martin had uncompromising standards of excellence and integrity. And these led to, at times, the discomfort of others.

To some he seemed combative, acerbic, gruff and intimidating.

In discussions of politics and economics, Martin almost always took the opposite point of view in a compulsive way—the better to illicit the best defense of whatever was being said and to be able to sort out ideas based on logic and history. Some took his positions of the moment to be his point of view. Hence, some people called him a right winger, others called him a bleeding heart liberal. And if they didn't stick around, they never realized how open Martin was to all ideas and all comers.

However, I would like to just spend a few minutes here concentrating on one limited aspect of Martin, but maybe his most important. Martin as a teacher of economics, "the enemy of the Dismal Science." Martin lived for teaching. On teaching days and many other days when he was going to attend seminars and workshops Teruko would drop him off at the back door of the Social Science Building. Briefcase in hand, he would walk to his office and then show up at the class quite early to outline his lecture on the board. As Mr. Bender pointed out earlier, his blackboard outline was not one of giant Roman Numerals, each followed by words scrawled in large letters. His blackboard outline was more akin to intricate embroidery work - tiny, neat handwriting, a blackboard crowded with verbal details and graphs, every axis and curve precisely labeled.

How was he in class?

Let me quote one student in his evaluation. This was from International Economics in the spring of 1996 - last spring.

Bronfenbrenner is more youthful, lively, and enthusiastic than many of the 40+ teachers I've had at Duke.

I never knew if he meant he had more than 40 teachers or he was talking about all of us who were over 40. But in any event, Martin was knowledgeable, accessible, and obviously interested in the satisfaction of his students. Now most of us would kill for evaluations like that. But now let's return to the beginning of a typical semester. Picture the first day of class. Students arrive in class and notice that this distinguished professor is really old. What does Martin do? The usual. He hands out a syllabus, explains course content, exams, papers, office hours, grading, and so on and so forth. However, he gleefully interjects one condition. The condition, he says, is, "That I don't keel over dead by the end of the semester."

Imagine the bewilderment of a hither-to-fore sheltered Duke undergraduate! This old professor not only jokes about being old, he openly jokes about keeling over dead!

He also jokes about economists, politicians, administrators, colleagues, and, of course, students. For example, Martin once quipped that “the common denominator of Duke students is that they all have straight teeth.”

His teaching style and career drew on his own experiences at the University of Chicago. There he was the peer of four future Nobel Laureates and many other luminaries including Greg Lewis, whose widow is in the audience on the right hand side about six rows back. And having survived the bumps and demands of a Chicago education himself, he demanded the best from each and every student. Indeed, he tolerated no less.

He could be the grand inquisitor in class, and he claimed to use his old prisoner of war interrogation techniques on students.

He regularly asked students questions—lots of questions. If a student’s answer was wrong, or he said he didn’t know, Martin came back to them and asked them another question. Martin explained to me that “this was giving them a chance to redeem themselves.” Needless to say, not all students sought redemption.

He goaded under-performers in one of two directions: toward their potential intellectual development, or toward the door.

In this decade, Martin mercilessly lampooned all that is PC. For decades, he has regularly railed against the Greek system on campus. As he wrote to Duke’s Dean of Arts and Sciences and Trinity College on March 27th of this year, “I don’t know *I Felta Thi* from a *Tappa Kegga*,” except perhaps neither one is *Phi Beta Kappa*.”

He quipped that teaching consists of “casting artificial pearls at genuine swine.” We had all heard this one more than once. To me, the first repetition came as something of a relief. I finally realized that Martin’s repertoire, while large, was not infinite.

Some students idolized him, and in the 1980s he had a Ph.D. student who followed him around like a puppy dog and tried to imitate Martin’s style—down to the very cartoons Martin posted on his office door.

Considerably more successful, was a recent undergraduate whose adoption of Martin’s style was so complete that in filling out his student evaluation of Professor Bronfenbrenner. The student quipped:

“He (Bronfenbrenner) taught me things even a non-economist should know.”

Martin was disarmingly self deprecating. Routinely, the close of his letters brought a chuckle as  
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Superannuatedly yours  
Kenan Professor Demeritus D E M E R I T U S

Or another recently signed as:

Extinguished Professor of Economics

*Marjorie McElroy*

Martin spared no one. One highly mathematical field in economics is econometrics. Practitioners are called “econo-metricans”, but Martin called the practitioners “econo-magicians.” And Ed Tower remembers that for Martin the mathematical applications of rational expectations theory became “rational expektorations.” He regularly quoted everyone from Gilbert and Sullivan to Shakespeare. Here is his twist on W.H. Auden:

Thou shalt not sit with Statisticians, nor commit a social science.

We are here today to honor Martin and to comfort his family and to comfort each other for his loss. He made us flinch in pain, laugh with delight and see the light all at the same time.

We will miss him greatly and I would like to paraphrase some very recent student evaluations of his teaching: Martin is a wonderful teacher. He’s enthusiastic—and it raves on and on and on—then at the end the student says, “I wish he could go on teaching for 50 more years.