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THOUGHTS ON MY HES LIFE

BY
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When I completed my PhD dissertation on the history of American Institutional Economics in 1979, I was newly hired in the Department of Economics at the University of Victoria but with no immediate colleagues who had an interest in my subject matter or with whom I could discuss ideas or have read my papers. My doctorate was from the University of Durham in England, with Denis O'Brien my supervisor. Denis was a wonderful supervisor, but my correspondence with him diminished after I completed my degree, as institutionalism was not his own area. He also disliked travel and never attended a History of Economics Society (HES) meeting himself.[1] I had attended a UK history of economics (HET) conference that Denis hosted in Durham and had met Bob Coats, and had spent a year at the University of Maryland with Allan Gruchy (living in a basement suite owned by Dudley and Louisa Dillard, and also home to a large number of cockroaches), but otherwise had no other real contacts in my area. I was in correspondence with Bob Coats, and was soon to begin corresponding with Warren Samuels over articles submitted to the *Journal of Economic Issues*, but I had not met him at that time. My need to find a community led me to join the History of Economics Society and to attend my first HES conference at Michigan State (hosted by Samuels) in 1981. Looking back at the program, I see that there were a few people around my own age there (David Levy, Phil Mirowski, Gary Mongiovi, and Jim Wible),[2] but at the time it felt as if everyone was of an older generation. Nevertheless, I was welcomed in a very friendly manner, taken out drinking with some of the older guys such as Royall Brandis, Y. S. Brenner, Abe Hirsch, and Eugene Rotwein, and met up with Warren Samuels, Bob Coats, Craufurd Goodwin, and others. That meeting was not a very large one, but I had no doubt I had found my community. The next few years involved HES meetings at Duke, Virginia, Pittsburgh, and George Mason, during which I got to know more of the HES community. The number of younger people also increased slowly, the 1984 conference in Pittsburgh also including Jeff Biddle, Bruce Caldwell, John Davis, Wade Hands, Uskali Maki, Mary Morgan, and Margaret Schabas. These people and others who came slightly later became my HES cohort, regularly attending HES meetings together and eventually becoming involved with running the society. Bob Coats and

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[1] Even when I successfully nominated him for Distinguished Fellow, he did not come to the HES.

[2] Bruce Caldwell is listed on the program but he tells me he did not attend until the year after.

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Warren Samuels were my closest mentors in those early years,[3] and, most likely due to Bob, I was nominated and elected to the HES executive committee in 1985, I think the first of my cohort to be so involved.

My participation in HES governance continued as I was elected vice-president in 1990 and president-elect in 1995. While I was vice-president Dudley Dillard withdrew from the presidency for health reasons. I was asked to step in but I felt that I did not then have the status to be president and had some health issues of my own, which had prevented me from attending the previous two annual meetings. Fortunately, Todd Lowry was able to persuade Bob Herbert to take over. As vice-president I organized the HES sessions at the American Economic Association (AEA) meetings in January 1992. I received a call from William Vickrey (then the incoming president of the AEA), who wanted to chat about his childhood in Victoria, living in the house that is now the Victoria Art Gallery. A few years later, in 1996, after publishing my first book and giving assurances about my recovered health status, I did become president, and brought the society's conference to Vancouver for the first time. I think I had about 180 registrants. I still remember that conference both vividly and fondly, including the joke I made in my opening remarks at Axel Leijonhufvud's expense—that was a risk but it was met with a roar of laughter.[4] Axel was my guest speaker, a delightful man, and, fortunately, could take a joke.

My years as president-elect, president, and past president of the society were particularly hectic (1995–96 to 1998–99). One issue that immediately presented itself concerned the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought (JHET).* Don Walker had edited the journal since 1990, taking it from the earlier *HES Bulletin* and doing everything concerning the production of the journal himself, even driving the copy a significant distance to the printer. Don, understandably, spearheaded an effort to move to a commercial publisher, and the first issue produced by Carfax appeared in March 1998.[5] Then, suddenly, Don resigned as editor with *extremely* short notice. I had to call Bob Clower (then HES president) to get him to form a search committee, with myself as chair,[6] and, with amazing good fortune, we were able to get Steve Medema to take over the journal beginning in 1999. There were few accepted papers in the pipeline when Steve took over and it took quite an effort to get sufficient material of good quality to fill the first few issues. I joined the editorial board in 1999 and am still a member. Steve's editorship, as we all know, went on to be a huge success. Moreover, once Bob Clower became president, it became evident that he saw his role primarily as a figurehead. In addition to dealing with the editorship, I became, in effect, an acting president, making sure meetings were organized, agendas produced, and decisions made. Jane Clary also

[3] The fact that I had relationships with Allan Gruchy as well as with Bob Coats and Warren Samuels placed me in the middle of the hostilities between Allan and the others relating to Bob's cutting review of Allan's book, which was published by Warren in the *Journal of Economic Issues.* At the HES meeting at Virginia (or maybe at Duke), I had the doubtful pleasure of introducing Allan to Bob (they had not met previously). At a later time, I also acted as a go-between for Denis O'Brien and Sam Hollander, who had published their sharp differences over Ricardo.

[4] I began by saying that Axel was extremely well known for his penetrating econological study "Life Among the Econ," and also, of course for his "amusing reinterpretation of Keynes." Mark Blaug thought that was great.

[5] Carfax was soon to be absorbed by Routledge. The journal later moved to Cambridge.

[6] Other members were Brad Bateman and Phil Mirowski. Brad persuaded Steve Medema to stand.

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made huge contributions toward the organization of the conference in Charleston that year.

A further major issue arose with the resignation of our secretary/treasurer. A search committee was struck with myself as a member. Once more with great good fortune, we found a willing candidate in Neil Niman, who took over in 1999. I cannot say enough about Neil's efforts. While I was president, I had become concerned about our legal status as a non-profit, but my enquiries had failed to get a response that satisfied me. Once Neil was elected, I asked him to investigate. As it turned out, our federal non-profit status had lapsed many years previously, lost in various moves of the secretary/treasurer office. It took Neil several years to sort it out and get us back in compliance again while avoiding any tax penalties. This was not the first time HES had had administrative issues: I was told that Royall Brandis at one point had to make an emergency trip to the office of our then treasurer to pick the membership checks up off the floor and pay them in.

My other contributions to the society were to revive the HES archive at Duke (which had been forgotten about), help create the office of manager of electronic information (filled by Ross Emmett in 1995), produce a folder for incoming presidents with information and timelines (this became handed down as a gift to the new president-elect for many years afterwards), and to begin the discussion of actually spending some of the HES's accumulating funds on promoting the history of economics. Several years later I was asked to chair the search committee for an editor to replace Steve Medema. After much discussion and to-ing and fro-ing, a joint editorship with Marcel Boumans and Evelyn Forget was proposed and accepted.[7] They took over in 2008.

On a more academic level, the society had become my regular venue for presenting my research. I organized quite a few conference sessions, the topics of which indicate the direction of my work. The first session I organized was in 1988 on the topic of the old and new institutionalism. This was a session inspired by Richard Langlois's book on the new institutional economics and grew, beyond my belief, to two sessions involving myself, Langlois, Geoff Hodgson, Anne Mayhew, Viktor Vanberg, and Charles Leathers—with Warren Samuels as discussant. The first session had a crowd come into the room and I remember Charlie Leathers and I exchanging looks of amazement as never had a session on institutionalism been more than only modestly attended before. The following year I organized a session on John R. Commons. As vice-president I organized four sessions at the Allied Social Science Associations meeting in 1992. One of those was joint with the AEA and dealt with "Institutional Analysis in the History of Economics," and included my paper on "Rationality and Rule Following in American Institutional Economics" as well as papers on "Smith, Menger, and Hayek on Institutions and Unintended Consequences" by Stephan Boehm, and on "Marshall and Institutions" by Hans Jensen. Warren Samuels chaired and Jeff Biddle, Dick Langlois, and Yngve Ramstad discussed. These sessions mark the progress of my work on the old and new institutionalism that resulted in various journal publications and, ultimately, my 1994 book, *Institutions in Economics: The Old and the New Institutionalism.* After the book was published, I

[7] Marcel originally suggested a large group of co-editors. When persuaded out of this, he suggested a co-editorship with Evelyn Forget. At that point Evelyn had not even met Marcel!

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remember an exchange between Pete Boettke and Roy Weintraub that referenced my book: Roy arguing for HES members to focus on doing what he considered to be true historical research, and Pete referencing my book as an defense of work that was historical but also related to contemporary issues in economics.

Following on from that, Mary Morgan and I formed an unofficial network for the history of American economics, announced at the HES meeting in 1994, to promote what we both saw as a neglected area in the history of economics. This effort bore fruit at my own HES conference in a round-table discussion on American economics and several conference sessions on American topics. A number of these papers were published in a conference volume I edited: *The Economic Mind in America: Essays on the History of American Economics* (1998). This volume included excellent papers from Bill Barber, Jeff Biddle, Bob Coats, Avi Cohen, Bob Dimand, Ross Emmett, Craufurd Goodwin, Anne Mayhew, Steve Meardon, Neil Niman, and Jim Wible, among others. We were then invited to suggest a topic for a possible History of Political Economy (HOPE) conference on an American theme, and from our discussions came the conference on "The Transformation of American Economics: From Interwar Pluralism to Postwar Neoclassicism" held at Duke in April 1997. This conference, with its exceptional group of participants (including Brad Bateman, Craufurd Goodwin, Bob Coats, Roger Backhouse, Jeff Biddle, Ross Emmett, Marcia Balisciano, Anne Mayhew, Steve Medema, Roy Weintraub, Phil Mirowski, Wade Hands, and Perry Mehrling), firmly put the study of American economics on the map. Many of the papers were published in a *HOPE* journal volume that somehow lost the first part of the conference title, later used by Roy Weintraub for his HOPE conference on MIT, and came out as *From Interwar Pluralism to Postwar Neoclassicism* (1998). Two things stand out in my memory: Mary and I agonizing over our eventual decision to reject Bob Coats's contribution for publication, despite what we both owed him (it was a bit off-topic); and Mary and I congratulating each other at a subsequent conference on hearing Mark Blaug describe interwar American economics as "pluralistic." At that point Mary and I decided our job was done.

That HOPE conference also consolidated my thinking about the place of institutionalism in American economics, and resulted directly in my 1997 Presidential Address to the HES: "American Institutionalism and the History of Economic Thought." As I said to Scott Parris[8] at the time, that paper was the outline for my next book, but that was to take quite some time. When I finally finished an eight-year stint as chair of my department in 1999, I applied for and was awarded (much to my amazement) a substantial three-year Canadian SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) grant to work on the history of American Institutionalism. This was renewed for an even larger amount in 2002. This money financed a criss-crossing of the US and beyond to visit archives (Columbia University, Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, Roosevelt Library, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin—Madison, Eisenhower Library, Harvard University, University of Michigan, University of Texas, Brookings Institution, University of Chicago, University of Washington, National Archives, London School of Economics, Bank of England, Nuffield College) and a stream of papers presented regularly at HES meetings, and published very largely in *JHET*. The comments I received from my presentations were

[8] Scott was the economics editor for Cambridge University Press, which had published my first book.

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of huge value. I remember particularly helpful comments made by Jeff Biddle, Steve Medema, Perry Mehrling, Phil Mirowski, Mary Morgan, and Warren Samuels, and significant conversations and lengthy interviews with Mark Perlman and Warren Samuels.

The various papers I produced on institutionalism in the interwar period brought to light a trove of information on individuals, such Walton Hamilton and Morris Copeland, and on various economics programs and research centers, such as those at Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin, the Brookings Institution, and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). My first paper that really presented my thesis was "Understanding Institutional Economics: 1918–1929." This paper was based largely on my work with the Walton Hamilton papers and was written in a hurry in order to be presented at the HES conference in 1999. Mary Morgan was my discussant and I still remember my relief at her opening comment that I was asking a "cleverer question" about institutionalism than had been asked before.

In terms of the overall project, I think I am especially proud of the work I did bringing the contributions of Walton Hamilton back into the discussion of institutionalism, uncovering the history of the largely forgotten Robert Brookings Graduate School (that involved a significant tussle with an overly protective librarian), and piecing together the relationship between the NBER and its main funding agencies, the Rockefeller and Ford foundations. My work on the NBER originated from a comment Anna Schwartz made about Ford pushing out Arthur Burns. This was while I was visiting the NBER office in New York, talking to Robert Lipsey and asking questions about something else completely. Following up this tip took me on a trip to the Rockefeller Foundation, two trips to the Ford Foundation, and a trip to Abilene, Kansas, for the Eisenhower Library and the Arthur Burns papers. Abilene was not my favorite place, but the Burns papers were a gold mine of NBER meeting minutes. I was chatting to Bill Barber afterwards and was about to say unkind things about Abilene when he told me that was his fondly remembered birthplace. All of this work eventually came together in my 2011 book, *The Institutionalism Movement in American Economics, 1918–1947: Science and Social Control.* The book won the best book prize from the European Society for the History of Economic Thought in 2013, and in 2014 I was honored to be made a Distinguished Fellow of the HES.

On that occasion I made a heartfelt remark that I will repeat here: it is completely impossible for me to imagine having the career I did without the HES. From the help and mentoring I received from Bob Coats, Warren Samuels, and Craufurd Goodwin, to the comments from my friends and colleagues, and most of all to the strongly collegial climate of the HES, where the criticisms my work received were almost always helpful and resulted in improvement. The HES cohort of which I was a part provided for mutual support, advice, and friendly, if sometimes pointed, criticism. Admittedly, there was a time I could have killed Perry Mehrling when on my third revision, but I will concede that the paper was better for it (thank you, Perry). As I look forward from my position as mostly retired, I can say that the mentoring activity of HES members is perhaps one of the most important functions of the society. Having no PhD students in the history of economics of my own, my efforts at mentoring have been based on working with honours and MA students and research assistants, of whom several have moved on to academic careers, and through refereeing and discussing papers at conferences. Both

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Craufurd and Steve sent me papers to referee with sometimes alarming regularity, and there were years I recorded refereeing some twenty-four papers. When Steve Medema co-nominated me for Distinguished Fellow, I very much appreciated his words about my mentoring activity via my referee reports. I made concerted efforts to give advice and positive criticism that was intended to improve the paper, and within the HES I think that attitude was, and still is, the norm.

History of economics is under threat within economics departments in the US and Canada, and has been for some time. Economics departments in North America (and in the UK, too) are clearly not interested in hiring specialist historians of economics, and I do not see that changing. It is a disciplinary trend outside of our control, a fact of life we just have to face. Histories of economics of the type I have been producing recently—archival and centered on historical questions—have a much more limited audience than the work I did earlier that connected to more contemporary issues. My more recent work I regard as far superior in terms of the historical research it contains and in terms of its importance for our understanding of the development of the discipline of economics, but the vast differences in the numbers of citations tell a different story concerning the size of the audience being addressed.[9] HES itself should not become too narrow in the type of work it sustains.

What else to do? I have been very happy to see the society become more active in promoting and helping young scholars via the Young Scholars Program and funding aid to summer schools in the history of economics. It is especially important to include those in other disciplines working on history of economics topics, as there is an increasing diversity in the departmental attachments of the younger people working in the area. In addition, the society has become more international, and while this is in part a reflection of the relatively weak disciplinary status of the history of economics in North America, it is also a potential strength, bringing greater diversity of viewpoints to an area long Anglo-centric, and placing the HES within a much deeper set of relationships with other societies and individuals around the world. While North American opportunities may have narrowed, the international arena has much extended the space for our endeavors, and I can only applaud the efforts of the society to enhance its international presence and contacts, and to give the society a central place in a well-connected and mutually supportive HET world. Occasional conferences outside of North America, such as next year's in Santiago, and the *JHET* writing workshops have been important initiatives in this direction. Attracting as many young scholars as possible to the society as a place within which they can thrive, as I did, is vital for its future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

[9] According to Google Scholar, as at January 1, 2024, my first book had 1,680 citations and my second book 400. My most-cited article on the old and new institutionalism had 815 cites and my most-cited purely historical paper (on Commons) had 202.

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