

## Economists and Higher Learning in the Nineteenth Century.

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In the 1980s a group of economists organized a research project on the institutionalization of political economy in the United States, Japan, Britain, and continental Europe. *Economists and Higher Learning in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William Barber, is the U.S. contribution to that project. It is a slightly revised paperback edition of Barber's edited *Breaking the Academic Mold* (Wesleyan University Press, 1988). *Economists and Higher Learning* consists of twelve essays recounting the beginnings of most of the top U.S. academic economics departments, and two broader essays - one an introduction by Barber and the other a general essay by Bob Coats on the professionalization of American economics. All are well written, informative, and insightful.

The stories of the individual departments are fun reading for any economist, but especially for those associated with the schools that are discussed: the University of Virginia, South Carolina College, Brown, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Penn, Chicago, The University of California and Stanford, MIT, and Wisconsin. The stories the contributors tell are based on archival documents and give one a sense of what interesting people economists were (and are). Each department has a slightly different, fascinating, story. These are stories of intrigue, of bias, of personalities, and of money. We see raids by departments, such as that by the University of Chicago on Clark's economic department; we see strategic bargaining gone wrong, such as Richard Ely's attempt to squeeze an extra \$1,000 out of the University of Chicago (the result: the appointment of Lawrence Laughlin to head the new Chicago department and the subsequent creation of the Chicago economics tradition in Laughlin's image). We see political persecution - economists vilified for their unorthodox views. The whole thing is a veritable soap opera.

Reading these essays made me realize how Anglicized our history of thought presentations (including mine) have become. Before reading this book, I had somehow always pictured studying economics in the 19th century, even in the United States, as studying well known British books. The collective story told by the contributors to this volume is one of students studying Americanized "textbooks" in which the views of the master were presented and contrasted with those of well known British writers. This American economics differed substantially from British economics. For example, a number of contributors point out that in the United States, Ricardo's theory of rent received short shrift from the beginning since availability of land in the west meant that Ricardo's theory did not fit the American reality. Similarly with the British view of services and unproductive labor. This view was little taught in the U.S. church-related universities since it led to questions about the value of the clergy. (This was pre-tenure, and academic freedom was much in dispute.) In short, it is not only women who have been marginalized by historians of thought; it is also American economists, and I suspect many other non-British economists.

In his introduction, Barber nicely sums up the general lessons that come out of the collection. He clearly summarizes how the economics profession as we know it developed around the turn of the time of the U.S. Civil War as part of a broader change in educational practices. Before that time, students learned the Bible, ancient languages, mathematics, and some science and moral science. With the new wealth flowing into the universities in the 1870s and 1880s,

and with the new problems caused for society by the industrial revolution which created that wealth, it was inevitable that there would be a change in what was taught. It is clear from these stories that the profession did not develop solely from the interaction of objective scholars but, rather, was heavily directed by an interaction of rent-seeking scholars whose advancement depended on their ability to play the game as well as on their intellectual additions to the economics field. The branches of economics that succeeded had to succeed not only within the field of economics, but also within the academic institutions of which economics was a part.

As is often the case after reading an interesting book, one is left with many questions. For example, while the stories are told in relation to economics, it is clear that it was not economics as we know it; it was political economy, which included much of what we now consider sociology, political science, anthropology, and moral philosophy. To understand the economics profession today I think we need a Part II of the story which would detail the division of political economy into component parts. I suspect that the fights and intrigue of the building-up stage presented here will be pale in regard to the fragmenting stage. An initial inkling of the difficulties that breaking up will involve can be seen in the fight between Ely's social activism, Veblen's cosmological vision, and Sumners and Laughlin's conservatism. These differences led to bitter fights which helped shape our profession. In the book's concluding essay, Coats summarizes what has gone before and also makes some important points of his own. One is to remind us of the absolute numbers of people the story is about. In 1880 only three academics at leading schools devoted most of their time to political economy and between then and 1900 only another 59 Ph.D.'s were added. It's no wonder that individual personalities played an important role.

The book nicely complements the Kadish and Tribe edited volume, *The Market for Political Economy* (Routledge, 1993) on the development of British economic institutions in the late 19th century. I have not seen the continental European and Japanese companion volumes but, if they measure up to this standard, I look forward to reading them.

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