

# AN INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Although this essay is essentially an intellectual biography, personal experiences have influenced my career as an economist and historian of economic thought. For this reason, I shall devote some space to these experiences before turning to the main topic.

My parents migrated from Sicily to the United States prior to the First World War; met and then married in this country and eventually settled in Hartford, Connecticut. I was conceived in 1929, the year of the Great Crash and born the following year at the onset of the Great Depression. However, for my family our economic depression had begun in 1929, when my father was seriously injured at a construction site and spent the next 8 months hospitalized, leaving my mother, who was pregnant with me, and my two siblings, without any means of support.<sup>1</sup>

Because of my father's disabilities and the depression of the 1930s, we were in a state of poverty for 10 years, and it was only with the beginning of the United States rearmament in 1939–1940 that relief finally came when my older brother and sister dropped out of high school and found employment, which contributed to the family's income.

Growing up as a child in such an environment, I had very limited career expectations regarding my future. A few teachers who took a personal interest in me encouraged me to enroll in the college preparatory curriculum in high school. I did so half-heartedly, with no expectations of ever receiving a college education.<sup>2</sup> None of this made any sense to me and, after an illness which caused me to fall behind in my school work, I too became a high school "drop out" and enlisted in the army at age 17.

To my surprise, my scores on the army induction tests were impressive

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This memoir was written at the invitation of Professor Donald Walker as part of a series initiated and carried out by him for the publication of the intellectual biographies of distinguished historians of economic thought.

<sup>1</sup> At that time there were few, if any, public "safety nets" for those in dire financial circumstances and our survival depended upon the help of relatives and neighbors. Fortunately, the tenement in which we lived was owned by our local parish church and we were not faced with eviction.

<sup>2</sup> At best what was hoped for was to acquire a "trade" through apprenticeship. Graduating from high school was considered a major accomplishment in working class households at that time. All this was to change after World War II.

enough to draw the attention of the personnel officer who singled me out from the group. I shall never forget the expression of disbelief on the personnel officer's face when, in response to his question regarding my training in the army, I informed him that I had been advised by my brother-in-law to choose "dry-cleaning" training so that I might join his business later. The personnel officer had better sense than I did, and he routed me through a training program which eventually led me to United States Army Headquarters at the Pentagon in the Office of the Adjutant General, where I remained for my entire time in military service. It was here that my experiences had a most important effect upon my future. For the first time in my life, I lived and worked among the most highly educated and intelligent men I had ever known, those who literally ran the army bureaucracy, some of whom became my mentors. It was here that I decided to acquire a college education upon my return to civilian life. Without the motivation from my military experiences, I doubt that my life would have taken the path that it was to take.

Unfortunately, just prior to the expiration of my enlistment, I contracted a viral eye infection and, given the state of medical sciences at that time, I was told by the physicians at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C.<sup>3</sup> that there was a high probability that I would be blind by the age of 40. Upon my separation from military service, I returned home thoroughly discouraged by the prospect of not achieving my educational goals. Despite the painful eye problem and impaired vision, I decided to pursue my goals. I enrolled in an accelerated high school program for veterans offered by the Hartford Public School System, married, and upon completion of that program enrolled in what is now called the University of Hartford. I was able to complete a two-year program before exhausting my educational benefits under the GI Bill. I then worked full time with the expectation of resuming my education in the future.

Successful careers, first as an internal auditor and eventually chief auditor for a major corporation, and later with an insurance agency, where I acquired success early, being fully established in that business in two years, were not personally satisfying. Although financially rewarding, I found business life intellectually sterile and personally boring. While recovering from a serious illness, I decided to investigate the possibility of resuming my education and considered two careers, law and economics.

A career in teaching economics seemed most fruitful. The demographics in the late 1950s pointed to a huge expansion at the college level as the "baby boomers" would begin to arrive at colleges in the early 1960s. My plans were to earn my undergraduate and graduate degrees in time to enter the job market at that time. Upon receiving my undergraduate degree at San Jose State University in California, while working nights to support my family, I was admitted to the graduate program at Rice University, and upon completion of my course work and comprehensive examinations, I entered the job market in the fall of 1963, where for that year I was told there existed 10 positions for every applicant at the American Economic Association meetings. As it turned out my timing was correct.

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<sup>3</sup> Fortunately the physicians' prediction was incorrect and with time I was able to continue with my plans, in spite of my eye problems.

## II. MY TRAINING IN ECONOMICS

My career choice in economics was influenced by my experiences. As a child, I was confronted with the reality of economic life; economic depression, poverty, unemployment, and their effects were the life experiences of my family for a decade. These experiences had a permanent effect upon us, and hence my interest in economics. My undergraduate courses in economics were both exciting and a revelation to me.

Graduate school was entirely different. Concern with the real world, when it did exist, was presented in a highly abstract manner in the theory courses. It was not that I objected to the theory, but to theory as dogma. The environment for critical discussion was limited to technical nitpicking rather than more fundamental issues. Nevertheless, I avoided any expression of my personal feelings.

One day in a micro-economics theory course, I made what I thought to be a reasonable observation: that my business experiences in dealing with firms and consumers seemed contrary to the assumption of rational behavior in micro-theory. Apparently my comment struck a raw nerve, and the instructor kept us in class for over an hour beyond the regular scheduled time in defense of that assumption. At the time I was in no position to judge his discourse since I had little knowledge of the issues involved. I listened politely and even took notes. When we were finally dismissed he took me aside and informed me that if I continued in my belief that he doubted that I had a future in economics. I was shocked! Why is it so wrong to question? After all, economics is supposed to be a science, not a religion.

Fortunately, my study carrel was located next to the economics stacks in the library. I began to read several nineteenth century classic works in economics by Edgeworth, Marshall, Walras, Pareto, Fisher and others, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that those writers expressed many concerns regarding what today would be called methodological issues, some of which had disturbed me as a student. So my despair was replaced by enthusiasm and I realized that I would have to pursue my own answers in the works of the best minds in the history of economics. With time, my interest in the history of economic thought developed to a point that it would become my major field.<sup>4</sup>

Upon completion of the formal requirements, I began research on my dissertation. Of all the authors I had read, I found Pareto to be the most interesting for my purposes, since he, more so than any other writers, expressed his views on methodological issues throughout his career.

Anyone writing a dissertation in the history of economic thought soon discovers the importance of contextual considerations. It is not simply a matter of writing about an author's work, but one must also acquire an understanding of the contemporary state of knowledge. In my case it was necessary to become familiar with neoclassical economics as reflected in the works of Pareto's contemporaries. Also because of Pareto's influence upon twentieth century

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<sup>4</sup> The economics department at Rice did not have a specialist in the field and upon learning of my interest in majoring in this field, as well as the desire of other students for courses in the field (which I promoted), the Department recruited Jack Melitz, a student of Viner at Princeton, an historian of thought with a special interest in the philosophy of science.

economics, it was also necessary to trace these influences to current economic theory. To acquire the necessary background was just as demanding as mastering Pareto's own works. In addition, because the major emphasis of the research would be methodological, then it was also necessary to acquire some understanding of contemporary as well as the current state of the philosophy of science. In this latter regard I had the benefit of Professor Melitz's guidance.

Unfortunately, I had only completed one chapter of my dissertation when Professor Melitz resigned from his position at Rice. I was left without anyone in my field to supervise my work. With little assistance and guidance, I was able to successfully complete my dissertation while teaching at the University of North Carolina. The dissertation was later published by the University of North Carolina Press as *Pareto's Methodological Approach to Economics: A Study in the History of Some Scientific Aspects of Economic Thought* (1968). The book was well received by the profession and is still being cited today after thirty years.

### III. TEACHING

My career has taken two related research paths: the history of economic thought with a special interest in neoclassical economics in general and Pareto in particular, and economic methodology. Although I have published extensively in these two areas, I have also published in other fields such as theory, labor, and finance.<sup>5</sup>

At Chapel Hill I have taught two graduate courses reflecting my special interests. The first is a one-semester survey course in the history of thought with an emphasis on theory. With time this emphasis has shifted more toward current economic thought, with the history of economic thought providing a perspective for the former. This is a required course at Chapel Hill, and every graduate student who has come through the program during the past thirty-two years has taken this course from me. The change in emphasis in this course from history to current economic thought (both parts are equally divided in the course) reflects the changes which have taken place in graduate training during this period. As graduate training has become more specialized and technique-oriented with time, I found that students had less and less perspective not only in the *history* of thought but also in *current* economic thought. What they were being exposed to was very field-specific issues mostly of a technical nature at the expense of ideas regarding the nature of their discipline. As a counter-weight to this trend, I have attempted to provide an overview of the nature of our discipline, beginning with an historical perspective and then moving on to current economic thought.

The second graduate course is a reflection of my long interest in methodology. This course is a one-semester elective course which has been offered every year since the mid-1960s. This course has been popular with a handful of graduate

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<sup>5</sup> At Rice I prepared for and took written and oral comprehensive examinations in micro, macro, and monetary theory, history of thought, economic history, labor economics, industrial organization and comparative systems.

students who concern themselves with such matters. The course covers the following topics: intellectual traditions (utilitarianism, idealism, positivism, Marxism, American pragmatism, etc.), ethical neutrality, scope, method and methodology in the social sciences, method and methodology in economics, and current topics in economic methodology. The course is comprehensive but not at the expense of depth. Students acquire an understanding of the field on a par with specialists in the field.

#### IV. RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT

The material collected on Pareto during my dissertation research consisted of his works in economics, sociology and his writings on methodology. Since my dissertation focused on the latter, there remained a wealth of material regarding the former two areas. Much of what the profession knew about Pareto's economic theories came to us through the works of Schultz (1929), Allen (1938), Hicks (1939), and Samuelson (1947). The manner in which Pareto's theories were introduced to the profession is important.

The above writers were not interested in a systematic and comprehensive presentation of Pareto's works. Instead they picked and chose from his works material which was of current interest to them. The result was a fragmented and very incomplete, though important, picture of Pareto's contributions. Essentially my publications on the theoretical parts of Pareto's works have dealt with the neglected aspects of his works, or a correction of misconceptions based on fragmented interpretations. These I did in the areas of production theory (1969c); welfare theory (1969a, 1972b,c, 1980b); marginalism (1972b); monetary and employment theory (1969b); biography (1976); general equilibrium theory (1991a); rent theory (1974c, 1992a, 1992c); business cycles (1998c); and utility theory (1998a).<sup>6</sup>

Since Pareto's sociology, although wider in scope than his economics, possessed economic implications, I devoted some amount of research to his sociology. The economic aspects of Pareto's sociology such as growth theory, business cycles, public finance, and inflation are presented (1983a), as well as articles of wider scope such as population (1973a,b), political economy (1974b), and sociology (1975a, 1983b, 1993a,b), national security (1991b), models of interpersonal interaction (1995), and development (1972b).

Along the way, I have done research and published works on other writers such as Walras (1967, 1978a,b), Edgeworth (1972a, 1980b), J. M. Keynes (1971c, 1985a, 1992b), Bickerdike (1980a), Quesney (1979a), Cantillon (1981, 1985b), Marx (1989b), Kondratieff (1988), and Harold T. Davis (1989a), to mention a few.

I have been consistent in my approach to the history of economic thought in that my research and publications deal with some neglected aspect of an author's work, new evidence which provides new insights into an author's work, a correction of prevailing views regarding an author's work, and historical topics of current interest for modern economics.

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<sup>6</sup> Some of these articles were co-authored. See the reference list for details regarding co-authorship.

Pareto's work, as represented by his contributions to utility, production and general equilibrium theory, can be viewed as more or less a refinement and elaboration of the work of his predecessor, Walras. The theoretical edifices which Walras constructed during the latter part of the nineteenth century represent an achievement of the first order in the history of economics. Indeed, given the priority and originality of his work, Walras's system of general equilibrium is without a doubt the most important theoretical innovation of the nineteenth century in economics.

If one turns to both writers' works outside the scope of "pure economics," one finds their respective positions are reversed, for Pareto's *Trattato* overshadows Walras's *Études d'Économie Sociale* in many important aspects. Walras's primary concern was "justice", whereas for Pareto his interest was in the reciprocal relations which determine the sociological state. By widening the scope of his analysis, Pareto encountered many conceptual and theoretical problems not present in economics. His approach to this problem was more methodological than theoretical, but one which also possessed many important implications for the social sciences. With time my interest was drawn to these issues as reflected in my more recent research and publications.

## V. RESEARCH IN METHODOLOGY

My interest in methodology goes back to my graduate student days. Areas of research and publications include such topics as value judgements in economics (1971a,b), historical contextual matters (1974a), the relationship between science and history (1975b), theories of behavior (1977), theory choice (1979b), the problem of progress in economic science (1984), the crisis in economic theory (1986), Marxian perspectives (1989b), the problem of interpersonal interaction (1995), the problem of knowledge (1997), and selection criteria in the history of economic thought (1998b).

When the philosophy of science took a turn away from modern positivism (as reflected in the works of Hempel, Nagel and others) in response to Kuhn's sociology of sciences approach, the scope of the philosophy of science, as reflected in the work of Popper and Lakatos and others, narrowed considerably. Attention was drawn to the growth of knowledge literature, to the neglect of many issues which concerned positivists. Among these were ethical neutrality, theory choice, scope; and so on. This neglect rendered the new literature too narrow in its perspective. For this reason, although I gave that literature full coverage in my graduate course, I had my doubts about its ability to replace fully its predecessor. Most importantly, because the growth of knowledge literature was more taxonomical and descriptive than analytical in nature, I had doubts about its importance for the advancement of that field. Indeed my lack of enthusiasm in contributing to that literature was due to my feeling early on that it would lead to an intellectual dead-end.

A few historians of thought embraced the growth of knowledge approach and its extensions, enthusiastically in applying it to the history of thought, to the neglect of the other aspects of methodology with which positivism had dealt. What is more, some historians of thought began to refer to themselves as

“economic methodologists”, that designation did not capture the attention of the profession in general. Indeed their influence on the profession was, in general, nil, and most economists today continue to adhere to the older philosophy of positivism.

When it appeared that the growth of knowledge approach in the history of thought had exhausted itself, then McCloskey’s *Rhetoric*, which had made something of a stir in the profession earlier, provided a new focus for historians of thought, particularly “economic methodologists”, and his work received renewed interest. I shall not go into the details of his work, since it is well known; instead I would like to suggest a perspective which might put his work into its proper context. In general, historians of thought are not familiar with the intellectual origins and parallels of his ideas. In particular, the deconstructionist literature not only has investigated its own implications thoroughly, but offers a basis for evaluating some important issues relating to McCloskey’s work. His “subjectivism” is applied to economics, rather than (English) literature and linguistics as is the case with much of the deconstructionist literature. In any event, this matter is being currently researched, together with the more general problem of knowledge, by myself and my students.

In retrospect, what is most disappointing is that the so-called “economic methodologists” and other historians of thought with an interest in methodology have had to borrow their ideas from the outside. This situation would have been understandable when that area of specialization hardly existed thirty-five years ago. In any event, significant contributions to economic methodology have been conspicuously absent. Hence we are led to the philosophy of science as opposed to the practice of science, to which I shall next turn.

## VI. SOUTHERN ECONOMIC JOURNAL

In addition to teaching and research, another facet of my career is my thirty-year affiliation with the *Southern Economic Journal*, twenty-eight years of which I served as Managing Editor. Aside from the usual responsibilities of running a professional journal, my long tenure as Editor provided me with a perspective which relatively few members of the profession acquire. Namely, I had the opportunity to observe and be a part of the changes in research orientations and methods during this period. This overview ultimately caused me to develop a detachment where I began to view my profession as material for study in itself. I began to examine methodological issues in terms of the work being done by practitioners in the profession rather than by philosophers of science. It seemed to me that the purpose of the philosophy of science was to “explain” the nature of science, not prescribe how science should be conducted (Popper, for example).

With time the *Journal* was to become my laboratory, and the objects of my investigation became the authors and their activities, as well as the nature of the reviewing process. It soon became clear to me that a difference existed between the philosophy of science which economists allegedly preached (positivism) and the practice of economics. For example, the criteria for “theory choice” (the selection process by which papers were accepted or rejected) were not totally objective in the sense described by positivists, but some of the criteria were

subjective. Although certain professional norms existed within certain methods used (mathematical, econometric, etc.) and could be called “objective” in that they were generally adhered to by researchers, their importance diminished with the standardization of graduate training and the professionalization of the discipline. Ultimately what mattered in the acceptance or rejection of submissions was their *significance*. But significance could only be a judgement based on the *subjective* state of knowledge of the reviewer. I encountered such comments as, “I like this paper,” or “this is an interesting paper” or “this is a hot topic,” reflecting the opinion or subjective state of knowledge of the reviewer. In addition, other “non-scientific” factors such as reputation, affiliation, and political orientations of the writers as well as policy implications seemed to influence the selection process.<sup>7</sup>

Space does not permit me to go into the other facets of my experiences as Managing Editor which have influenced my work (for more on this see my *SEJ* article (1997)). What is less obvious is how my experiences were reflected in the work of some of my students in the area of methodology. To begin, Bruce Caldwell’s dissertation, later published as *Beyond Positivism: Economic Methodology in the Twentieth Century* (1982), is well known. In addition, other more recent dissertations in methodology are: Christopher D. Mackie, *Theory Appraisal and Selection in Economics* (1994), recently published as, *Canonizing Economic Theory* (1998); Kirsten K. Madden, *Method Choice in the History of Econometrics* (1995); Martin Gross, *Models of Man: Pareto’s Contribution* (1995); and Benjamin Balak currently writing a dissertation on McCloskey’s *Rhetoric of Economics*.

My journal experiences account for a substantial part of my later interest in the sociology of science as an approach to not only theory choice, but also in explaining the evolution of our discipline during the post-World War II period. The other source of my interest in the sociology of science is from Pareto’s treatise in sociology, *The Trattato*. Anyone taking the extraordinary time and effort necessary to read this work cannot help being affected by it. Regardless of one’s reaction to his sociology, its vision of the nature of social behavior will leave an impression on the reader.

One aspect of Pareto’s sociology concerns the matter of ethical neutrality. Marx was the first to raise this issue regarding the effect of cultural influences on the observer. An outgrowth of Marx’s work was the Marxian sociology of knowledge, and its relativistic approach to knowledge. For Marx, only a few gifted persons (himself included) were capable of removing the influences of environmental agencies which caused them to live in a world of illusionism. Pareto encountered the same problem in his sociology and his approach was to look for sociological complexes (residues) which were not time or space dependent. Whether Pareto’s strategy to achieve objectivity was a self-delusion resulting in an idiosyncratic view of mankind, as some of his critics claim, or whether their rejection derived from cultural influences, i.e. their own “illusionism,” is an unresolved problem in historical methodology, a problem

<sup>7</sup> For this reason I, together with Borts at the *American Economic Review*, were among the first to introduce the practice of double blind reviewing to deal with the first two factors above.

involving both ethical neutrality and theory choice and hence calling attention to the importance of these two relatively neglected areas of methodology.

## VII. IN RETROSPECT

Thirty-five years ago the consensus among economists in general and historians of thought in particular was that the history of thought was in a state of decline. Relatively few graduate students chose the field as their major field, and the long-term prospects appeared poor. As it turned out, the profession was consistent as regards its poor record of forecasting. The field has survived and prospered and several journals exist today in contrast to thirty-five years ago when there were none in existence.

In spite of these developments, the field has not enjoyed the same level of recognition as other specialized areas of economics. The history of thought is required in few graduate programs and it is not offered as a field in many programs. Yet these obstacles, which would seem to discourage new entries into the field, have not resulted in complete closure. At the same time, the increasing emphasis on technique rather than ideas in professional training has left a void in the profession which the history of thought can fill. Unfortunately, ignorance breeds ignorance and successive generations of economists who have never been exposed to the history of their discipline have little or no appreciation of such a perspective.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the field is not as appreciated as other fields in economics, especially at research-oriented institutions with graduate programs, although individually leadership recognition is accorded to those historians of thought who achieve that state.

I recall complaining to Professor William Jaffé about the profession's view of the history of thought some thirty years ago, and his response to me was that "good work is its own reward." And he was, of course, correct, for that is what matters in the long run. In retrospect, my career has been both personally and professionally rewarding, and I would not have had it any other way.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> One reason the field has survived is that candidates offer themselves as specialists in the history of thought and another field so that departments who would ordinarily find an historian of thought less attractive as a candidate are willing to hire someone to cover two fields for the price of one, so to speak.

<sup>9</sup> In this regard, I should also mention my efforts as a founder and organizer of the History of Economics Society among which included, obtaining seed money from the University of North Carolina for the founding of the Society, solicitation for members using the AEA membership list, maintaining membership records, composing the Society's by-laws and the establishment of the Society by the adoption of the by-laws at the membership meeting of the Society's first official conference which I organized at the University of North Carolina, and serving as the Society's first President.

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