

Editorial: special issue in honour of Mark Blaug

Mark Blaug used to begin his history of economics course with an old Greek proverb: “the fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing”.¹ He would then say that one could characterise most thinkers in the history of economic thought as either a fox or a hedgehog. As a student, I found that this character-driven view illuminated past economists’ theories in a fresh way and brought home to me the distinctiveness of their approaches. Nevertheless, after reading his work, attending his course, listening to him at seminars, and becoming familiar with his ideas on the history and methodology of economics, one question has always remained unanswered in my mind: was Mark Blaug a fox or a hedgehog?

If one focuses on his choice of research topics, one might be tempted to describe him as a fox. He wrote essays and articles on almost every subject in economics, and could take some credit for launching new ones, such as the methodology of economics, the economics of art, and the economics of education. He was always incredibly well-informed and up to date about the academic literature in all areas of economics. Indeed, he was well-known for reading voraciously and widely, not only within economics, but also in fields as varied as philosophy, political sciences, physics, biology, history, art, and literature. And while some foxes might have to sacrifice a grasp of detail for the sake of comprehensiveness, Mark’s pursuit of the economic ideas that interested him was far from superficial.

Yet from another perspective, he could be described as a hedgehog. There were a number of central issues that he returned to repeatedly and studied intensively (and almost obsessively) throughout his career, for instance, Ricardian economics, general equilibrium theory, the normative character of economics, and falsificationism in economics (see Blaug 1958; 1992 [1980]; 2002; 2003; 2007). Considered separately, Mark’s approach to these topics was quite fervent and dogged towards a

¹ The oldest source of the maxim seems to be the 7th century B.C. poet Archilochus. In the 20th century the proverb was popularised by Isaiah Berlin’s celebrated essay *The hedgehog and the fox* (1993 [1953]).

well-defined goal. On this light, as a determined and indefatigable pursuer of certain issues, Mark shows the features of a hedgehog.

The ambivalence between the fox and the hedgehog in Mark's personality can also be seen in his approach to the history of economics. In his *Economic theory in retrospect* (1997 [1962]), Mark set out to provide a history of economics from the mercantilists up to John Maynard Keynes, a project that combined ambitious breadth (the mark of a fox) with an unusually narrow focus on theoretical analysis alone (the mark of a hedgehog). He was so well learned on each of the topics of his chapters, that the book reads *as if* each chapter was written by a devoted specialist on the respective topic. The book has been enormously successful through its many revised editions, and it seems to me that Mark's carefully judged ambivalence between comprehensive reach and single-minded purpose is part of what makes it a masterpiece.

Interrogating the theoretical coherence of the work of historical (and current) thinkers was characteristic of Mark's confrontational style of scholarship. He relished the intellectual thrill of rigorous scholarly debate and was rather good at it. Yet he was never only interested in winning. Rather, he used such debate as a method of inquiry, not only to challenge his opponents' ideas, but also to test and improve his own. As an observer of the history and method of economics, he was also attracted to other people's academic controversies as places where the gaps and weaknesses in conventional accounts were exposed to the most vigorous scrutiny and critique.

So it is not surprising that much of Mark's work can be organised and studied in terms of tensions or debates. Many of the topics in the history of economics that first interested him were famous scholarly conflicts, such as the Cambridge-Cambridge capital controversy, and the imperfect competition debates of the early twentieth century (see Fountain 2007). Likewise, in the methodological arena, Mark was attracted to heated intellectual disputes, such as between the Kuhnian and Lakatosian approaches to the philosophy of science, the historical and rational reconstruction views in historiography, and the defenders and critics of mathematical formalism in economic theory.

Mark's love of debate was reflected in his combative style, not only in his published writings, but also in his public addresses and conference interventions. As his wife, Ruth Towse (2013), has also pointed out, Mark's academic contributions were often worked out and developed by probing others' arguments and claims, provocatively

challenging established views and seeing what developed, or in ‘collaboration’ with a sparring partner of sufficient intellectual calibre. Yet, while the full onslaught of Mark’s deeply informed challenges could be a rather ferocious spectacle, I was always impressed by his ability to maintain the best of friendships with those he fiercely disagreed with.²

I have been talking of Mark’s combative intellectual style and his attraction to debates, conflicts, and tensions in economics, because the articles included in this special issue of *EJPE* dedicated to him are heavily concerned with such themes. More specifically, they all deal with at least one of Mark’s favourite academic debates in the methodology and history of economics:

1. The debate about the positive or normative character of welfare economics (and of economics in general).
2. The role of formalism in economic theorising (or the tension between mathematical rigour and practical relevance).
3. The proper approach to the history of economics (or the tension between rational and historical reconstruction).

In the first article, D. Wade Hands reviews one of Mark’s recurring topics: is the ‘new’ welfare economics positive or normative? Can such an area of economics be independent of ethical commitments, as some economists claim? Hands explores this subject with reference to the exchange that took place between Mark and Pieter Hennipman at the beginning of the 1990s. His account of their debate sheds light on the implicit assumptions of both authors and thus helps readers understand why it never came to a clear-cut conclusion. Hands ends by elaborating on his own contribution to the debate by, as he puts it, adding what Mark would have had to say to win his case that welfare economics is unavoidably normative.

In her article, Sheila Dow focuses on Mark’s concern that mainstream economists have become much more occupied with mathematical formalisation than with the empirical testing of their theories. Dow comments on Mark’s Popperian/Lakatosian methodology in the light of recent developments in economics and experimental results, such

² I witnessed this firsthand after a seminar at EIPE in which Mark and Deirdre McCloskey had had a long and fiery argument during the session. Not five minutes later, they could both be found chatting over a glass of beer and laughing together as old friends will.

as those questioning the validity of the axioms of rationality and optimising behaviour, which are part of the 'hard core' of mainstream economics. Dow then provides a methodological appraisal of whether the 'new' behavioural economics research program is progressive or degenerative in Popperian/Lakatosian terms.

In the third article, John Davis sets out to explain the evolution in Mark's historiographic method from a clear endorsement of rational reconstruction to his later reconsideration of the merits of historical reconstruction. Davis explores two issues: on the one hand, the tensions that result from the application of the economics of scientific knowledge to the study of economics research; and, on the other, the move to understanding economic phenomena in terms of path-dependencies, combined with an understanding of competition as a process rather than as an end-state. Davis argues that acknowledging these issues clarifies to a great extent Mark's disenchantment with rational reconstruction and his turn towards historical reconstruction.

In an almost complementary piece to Davis's article, Harro Maas refers to a brief correspondence between Paul Samuelson and Mark to clarify the latter's evolving position on how to practice the history of economic theory. Maas argues that Mark's intellectual development and the historical context in which he was working explain his changing position on the use of rational and historical reconstructions. Interestingly, Maas illustrates the main point of his essay with an historical reconstruction of Mark's approach to historiography.

In his contribution, Uskali Mäki considers Mark's campaign to make economic science more relevant to real-world practical concerns. Mark's normative methodology proposes adopting a falsificationist approach to economic scientific practice, as well as assessing the progress of economic theory in terms of a trade-off between practical relevance and mathematical rigour. According to Mäki, Mark's methodological prescriptions in favour of a more 'realist' economics are not 'realistic' in that they are neither systematically spelled out nor viable. After questioning whether there is in fact a necessary trade-off between rigour and relevance, Mäki argues that Blaug's intuitions can be developed into a more realistic account by bringing in two further topics: economic modelling and the institutions of academic research.

The sixth and closing article, by Jack Vromen, focuses on Mark's views on evolutionary economics. Vromen notices that, on the one hand, Mark had a positive attitude towards evolutionary economics, while

on the other hand, he saw no significant merits in the highly abstract theoretical forms of economic modelling which have become extensively used in this field. Vromen reviews Mark's position in relation to Milton Friedman's views on the selection mechanism produced by market competition, and in relation to the problems of excessive formalism. Then Vromen questions—like Mäki—whether the alleged trade-off between rigour and relevance is inevitable. Vromen illustrates his argument using Richard Nelson and Sidney Winter's theory of economic evolution, which combines the core ideas of an evolutionary approach with an abstract and formal methodology.

With the publication of this special issue, *EJPE* aims to make its own modest contribution to the celebration and commemoration of Mark Blaug's scholarly life and legacy (see also Shaw 1991; Boumans and Klaes 2013). We hope that the articles composing this issue will trigger new interest in Mark's work among scholars who are unfamiliar with it. And also that readers already familiar with his work will enjoy reconsidering some of his old contributions in the light of new methodological developments, as portrayed by the six very distinguished authors and former colleagues of Mark who write in this issue.

Let me close with a brief final comment on the fox-hedgehog conundrum. Mark had the ability and aptitude required to explore a wide range of intellectually exciting topics and debates, but at the same time the way he explored them was by a passionate and resolute pursuit of the right answer. Finding some difficulties in assigning Tolstoy to the right category, Isaiah Berlin (1993 [1953]) concluded that the Russian writer was a fox by nature, but a hedgehog by conviction. In a somewhat similar vein, Mark cannot easily be described only as either a fox or a hedgehog. I would say that he managed to achieve a thriving balance between the pluralistic interests and convictions of a fox, and the underlying monistic fervour and focus of a hedgehog.

LUIS MIRELES-FLORES

EDITOR IN CHARGE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

<editors@ejpe.org>

REFERENCES

Berlin, Isaiah. 1993 [1953]. *The hedgehog and the fox: an essay on Tolstoy's view on history*. Chicago (IL): Ivan R. Dee, Inc.

- Blaug, Mark. 1958. *Ricardian economics: a historical study*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Blaug, Mark. 1992 [1980]. *The methodology of economics, or how economists explain*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.
- Blaug, Mark. 1997 [1962]. *Economic theory in retrospect*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.
- Blaug, Mark. 2002. Ugly currents in modern economics. In *Fact and fiction in economics: models, realism, and social construction*, ed. Uskali Mäki. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 35-56.
- Blaug, Mark. 2003. The formalist revolution of the 1950s. *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 25 (2): 145-156.
- Blaug, Mark. 2007. The fundamental theorems of modern welfare economics, historically contemplated. *History of Political Economy*, 39 (2): 185-207.
- Boumans, Marcel, and Matthias Klaes (eds.). 2013. *Mark Blaug: rebel with many causes*. Cheltenham (UK): Edward Elgar.
- Fountain, John. 2007. A conversation with Mark Blaug. University of Canterbury. <http://youtu.be/cEzclKpuhmw> (accessed December 2013). The recording is also available at: <http://ejpe.org/interview-mark-blaug/> (accessed December 2013).
- Shaw, Graham Keith (ed.). 1991. *Economics, culture, and education: essays in honour of Mark Blaug*. Aldershot (UK): Edward Elgar.
- Towse, Ruth. 2013. Producing pearls of wisdom: a memoir of Mark Blaug's work practice. In *Mark Blaug: rebel with many causes*, eds. Marcel Boumans, and Matthias Klaes. Cheltenham (UK): Edward Elgar, 14-20.